Cuts Unscene: Hannibal, Season 4

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Cuts Unscene: Hannibal, Season 4

by DBMars

Summary

Seasons 1-3 of Cuts Unscene was a challenge to write one "deleted scene" per episode where Will and Hannibal built their romantic connection. The idea was that they would be canon as possible, and that you can watch the episode and read the fic at the right time and it would seem like a real outtake.

Season 3 is over. Time for a Season 4 based on the world built by the "cuts unscene" from seasons 1-3 while also wrapping up plots left from the original series.

As it's practically canon that we begin in Cuba (according to Bryan) we shall open there, but there is much more in store. STAY TUNED!

Notes

Season 4, Episode 1: Syncretism

Companion Song : “I’m With You” by Vance Joy

“...And if you need a light
I'll be the match to your candle
My darling, I'm ready, to burst into flames for you
I was just coasting till we met
You remind me just how good it can get
Well I've been on fire, dreaming of you
Tell me you don't
It feels like you do
Looking like that, you'll open some wounds
How does it start?
And when does it end?
Only been here for a moment, but I know I want you
But is it too soon?
To know that I'm with you
There's nothing I can do
And sometime around one
We fell asleep to escape from the sun
And we woke up to the sound of a storm outside
We stood at your front door
You looked at me and said "baby, this rain changes everything"

And my heart ran away from me
I was just coasting till we met
You remind me just how good it can get
Well I've been on fire, dreaming of you
Tell me you don't
It feels like you do
Opening up can open some wounds
How does it start?
And when does it end?
Only been here for a moment, but I know I want you
Darling, I do
I'm with you
There's nothing I won't do to see you shine
I'll swing for the fences
I'll run to the line
And it's high time that you love me
'Cause you do it so well to see you shine
I'll swing for the fences
I'll run to the line
And it's high, high time
Oh darling, I'm with you
Oh darling, I'm with you
There's nothing I won't do
There's nothing I won't do
I'm with you
Oh, darling, I'm with you.”

Season 4 Episode 1: Syncretism

Somewhere, a dog was barking.

Will turned over in bed with a soft sigh and curled his arm under the pillow. “Shh,” he murmured sleepily.

The dog barked again, three times, muffled as if somewhere outside. Why were the dogs out?

Will opened his eyes.

For a few long moments, he didn’t understand. His head felt fuzzy, his body disconnected, strange. And he was sleeping in mist.

Will reached out and touched the gauzy material that hung around the bed, trapping it between his fingers. He pushed it gently to the side and found the opening in the drapery. This revealed a small bedroom he did not recognize, with sea foam walls, mismatched but elegant furniture, and arched windows with flimsy curtains that fluttered in the fresh breeze.

Ocean. The smell was unmistakable, and the waves presented themselves out of the background tapestry of sounds.

Will slid his legs to the side of the bed and put his feet on the multi-colored tiles. He paused to look at his hands, then give his body a cursory glance. He was dressed in a thin tee-shirt and a pair of striped pajama pants. Easing himself to his feet, he took a few exploratory steps. He felt weak, but mobile, nothing more than the usual morning aches and pains.

The window revealed it wasn’t morning, however. A violently beautiful sunset crowned a swath of white-sand beach, the dunes dotted with a bit of greenery and the occasional palm tree. The only other structure in sight was a small house on stilts near where the dunes began, painted an Easter mauve with white trim. There were lights on inside.

Will watched the waves sweep the shore, stained pink and orange. His mind was dreamy and quiet, questions rising only to be swept away by the ocean’s rhythm.

The dog barked again. It seemed closer now.

He turned and examined the room more closely, though with vague curiosity. There were clothes in the drawers of the mid-century bureau and hanging in the armoire. He didn’t recognize them, but they seemed to be his based on the sizes. He touched one of the shirts, feeling the linen between his forefinger and thumb. An ephemeral sense memory surfaced, but it dissipated before he could grasp it.

The attached bathroom felt the same – familiar and yet not. It was tiled entirely in pale rose with a built-in tub and shower, the fixtures old but meticulously clean and maintained. There were more things here that seemed to be his; toothbrush, razor, a shaving mug with a brush.

The medicine cabinet had basic painkillers, mitigation for minor scrapes and burns, vitamins, and three different bottles of aftershave – none of which had ships on the bottle or names he recognized.

Will knew it was his reflection in the mirror, but he felt a strange kind of separation from it. It moved when he moved, and he knew the eyes, but so much seemed vastly different in ways he couldn't describe. Objectively, his hair was longer than he'd kept it since getting out of the Baltimore State Hospital. He needed a shave. And there was a thick, pale pink scar on his cheek that ran in a diagonal parallel to his cheekbone. Inside his mouth he could feel a knotted line that mirrored it, rough against his tongue. The injury seemed foreign, like it had happened to someone else, though the taste of Dolarhyde's knife lived in his memory. As it surfaced, he closed his eyes and pushed it away as if it was nothing more than a leaf floating on water.

He heard the dog again.

Will took off his sleepwear and left it on the rumpled bed before pulling on some things from the closet – a dark blue shirt and light linen pants. Everything fit and again, he had a little slip of déjà vu, like he'd worn them before. Barefoot, he padded to the bedroom door and opened it.

Stepping out, he could see the length of the house. There was a small kitchen, a table with four chairs, a sideboard, and a sitting area in one long rectangle leading up to what he presumed was the front door. The walls here were painted a slightly darker aqua than the bedroom, and again decorated with a mix of Victorian and mid-century pieces, heavy and dark in contrast to the high, airy ceilings and tropical colors and decorative touches. Arched windows fitted with stained glass at the apex let in some ambient light that remained in the east.

French doors on his right opened to a verandah, with a large wooden deck beyond stretching toward the ocean. This was arrayed with lounges, chairs, and side tables, with an unobstructed view of the sea, beach, and sky. Paradise, it seemed. Wherever it was.

The dog's bark was much closer now, near the front. Will followed the sound and found the front doors open to the evening breeze. Before him was another covered verandah with a table and chairs, and a long stone path that cut through an impressive manicured garden. The path ended at the massive entrance to a neoclassical Florentine-style mansion, its coral stone columns rosy in the sun's dying rays. The flicker of candlelight teased the growing darkness in one of the windows on the first storey, undulating as the gauzy curtains blew in the draughts of cool, salty air.

" *Buenas noches* ."

Will turned toward the voice. A woman sat in one of the chairs, a white-painted rocker, gently moving it with her feet. Her textured hair, a deep black, was twisted up on her head and tied in a bun, decorated with a white scarf. She wore a simple white linen dress fastened with cork buttons. One strap hung from her shoulder, baring her breast, where she fed a tranquil infant. A dog — had to be the one Will had heard — sat a few feet away on the well-tended grass. When it saw Will, it got to its feet, wagging its tail slowly but with increasing

confidence. It was clearly a mutt, but had an ear and face shape that almost called to mind an American Dingo. Her butterscotch fur was matted and dirty, but her eyes were bright and alert, a warm honey.

“ *¿Cómo se llama su perro?* ” he asked, surprised at how rusty and unused his voice sounded. He cleared his throat.

“She is not my dog,” the woman answered in accented English. “I think she is yours. She will be yours, if you feed her.”

Made about as much sense as anything else.

“There is meat in the icebox,” she suggested.

Will went back inside and found a small amount of shredded beef on a plate covered in plastic wrap. He returned and sat down on the other chair, resting the plate on the small table between them. The dog was shy at first, not willing to come until he tossed some meat on the lawn. With practiced patience, Will befriended the creature while the woman watched silently, feeding her baby until it slept.

At last, the dog consented to be petted, licking Will’s hands clean. When the beef was gone, so was she, off to attend to some unknowable dog business. Will took the plate back inside and set it by the sink, washed up, and returned to the woman. Night had spread her cloak over the sky, and the stars were impossibly bright, the cosmos winding over the horizon in a vast swath of diamonds.

Just over the pounding surf, he could hear music. The candles still burned in the window on the ground floor of the mansion above.

“El Doctor is there,” the woman said, “if you want to see him.”

Will nodded and the woman stood slowly so as not to disturb the child. In the moonlight her skin glimmered, rich and dark, and her eyes were pools of ink. “ *La bebé necessita acostarse* .” She nodded toward the Easter-colored house further down the path to the beach.

“Goodnight,” Will said as she brushed past him and disappeared into the ocean-soaked dark. She left the scent of incense in her wake.

Will turned and looked up at the mansion. Retreating back to the house, he found a pair of slide-on shoes by the door and tried them. Like everything else, they fit. He walked in the grass to muffle the sound of his steps as he approached the veranda of the larger house, stopping only to hold his hand up to the moon, which was swollen and optical.

The French doors here were open here as well. Will left his shoes on the veranda and stepped into an elaborate multi-level foyer filled with curling wrought iron, bronze statues, oil paintings, and vast marble columns, the floor inlaid with floral designs. The grand staircase split in two halfway up, and there were doors on either side. The opening on his left glimmered with light, and the music was louder now.

It was not a recording. Whoever was playing the piano stopped every so often and then began again as if trying to remember or perfect the piece. Will peered in the doorway of the canary-walled music room, eyes traveling the mix of art deco, mid-century, and Victorian-era furnishings that seemed to be arranged with a designer's attention to detail, showy but with an eye on utility as well. The space was dominated by a grand piano. A man sat at the bench, playing by candlelight, several pages of music spread out before him. Every so often, he stopped and wrote down a series of notes before playing them again.

Hannibal's fingers paused mid-chord. He raised his head as if scenting the air, then turned, catching Will's eye. His expression was one of mild hope. "Good evening, Will."

"I know that song," he said.

Hannibal stood up in a quick, eager motion, crossing the room to him. He was as dressed down as Will had ever seen him in light linen pants and a darker shirt, neck unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up. His hair was longer than Will remembered, and, though he couldn't be sure, a little more gray. It seemed as though he was going to reach out and touch Will, but Hannibal stopped short, backlit by the candles gathered on a small table near the piano. "Will," he said, disbelief rattling his voice, eyes wet and wide.

"You wrote that after I tried to have you killed," Will remembered with a little grimace.

"I did. I left my sheet music the night I left Baltimore." He studied Will carefully, inching forward as if Will might try to run from him. "I've been attempting a transcription, but I find it difficult to conjure the essence of the piece again."

"It was a long time ago," Will said.

"It was," Hannibal agreed. A pause. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. I found a dog out there. And, ah… a woman. With a baby."

"Please." Hannibal indicated a sleek little sofa and chairs gathered around a low table with a few more candles on it. Will sat, and Hannibal excused himself for a moment, returning with a black doctor's bag. He settled next to Will and opened it on the table. "May I?"

Will nodded. Hannibal withdrew the stethoscope and listened to Will's heart, took his pulse, blood pressure, and shone a small light in his eyes. After that it was a series of questions – was Will nauseated, dizzy, sleepy, did he have a headache? And would Will like something to drink?

Soon he had a sweating glass of white wine in his hand and Hannibal's full attention. Upon returning, he'd settled a few inches closer to Will then when they had initially sat down. Will wasn't prepared for how Hannibal's scent would make him feel – momentarily destabilized, and then simultaneously agitated and secure.

"Will," Hannibal said after they drank in silence for a few moments. "What I'm going to tell you may be upsetting. Please know that is not my intention."

Will nodded.

“It has been approximately eight weeks since you’ve spoken a word to me, or to anyone,” Hannibal said. “Does this come as a surprise?”

Will wrinkled his forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Will brought the glass to his lips. “I’m not sure I want to remember.”

“I think it’s best if you try.”

Will scoffed. “Is that your professional opinion, Dr. Lecter? Maybe I, ah, need some phototherapy? Seizures? A little psychic driving, a dash of brainwashing?”

Hannibal’s mouth edged down on the corners. “I have been treating you as your medical doctor only, not as your psychiatrist,” he said.

Will studied him for a few breaths. *I’ve always told you the truth in my own way.*

“I remember… the kill,” he said softly, looking at the wine in his glass as it reflected the candlelight. “N-not all of it, not every detail. It’s more like… looking at it though a kid’s kaleidoscope. It keeps turning and shifting in my head. But I remember the blood. Black in the moonlight. The taste. The Dragon, I can’t s-see his face. But I see you. I remember you. That moment when we both killed him. When we came together like… masses of air, hot and cold. High and low pressure… colliding.”

“Creating a storm,” Hannibal said. “A force of nature.”

Will nodded.

“And after that?” Hannibal was the one to break eye contact now, looking at the legs of the wine, backlit by the undulating candlelight. Will sensed a vein of longing behind the words. *He wants me to remember something. Something specific.*

Will moistened his lower lip. “I don’t, ah… I know I was — dreaming. Or-or maybe it was the blood loss, going into shock, but I wasn’t… *there* anymore. I was h-home — back in Louisiana. In the swamp, playing with Bandit. I found a snake. Then i-it was getting dark and I walked home, and my… mother was there on the porch, having a beer with one of the neighbors. And I walked up to her and she hugged me. She kissed the top of my head and t-told me to go wash up and go to bed. And then…” Will felt his throat thicken. He blinked back tears. “It started over. And I got to do it again. And again.” He smiled, lifting his hand to catch a tear before it fell.

“Will.” Hannibal’s gentle murmur made it worse.

Will drained his wine. Hannibal promptly refilled the glass, the liquid whispering against the crystal. “Then it was just… black. A long, uhm… *stretch* of darkness with moving shapes

that had no edges." He leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees. "And now… it's now. I woke up."

"What woke you?"

Will half-smiled. "I heard a dog barking."

Hannibal mirrored his expression, though there was a brokenness to it. "All of my pleading with you, and it was a dog that brought you back. That, or witchcraft."

Will immediately thought of the woman with the baby, and of Hecate. "Combination, maybe," he said.

Hannibal pressed his lips together briefly, looking through the windows into the night's velvet darkness rather than at Will directly. "I was afraid you wouldn't come back to me," he said, raw, vulnerable. "You drowned, Will. You had no heartbeat. I revived you that night. I brought you here and healed your body, but I couldn't bring you entirely back to life. You ate, you slept, you bathed and dressed, all these things independently – walked with me on the beach when I led you there. Otherwise, you were silent – staring at nothing. Without a scan, I couldn't be sure if your brain was damaged."

Will's heart crushed in, a star buckling under its own gravity. "I was, uhm… I was dead?"

"Medically speaking, yes. Not for long."

Heaven.

Heaven doesn't exist, his inner voice snapped in response to the errant thought. *If it does, I'm not wanted there.*

"Hmm," was all he could think to say.

"Are you hungry, Will?" was all Hannibal could think to say, apparently.

Will indicated yes. He could tell by looking at his wrists, and his face in the mirror, that he'd lost weight – not an insignificant amount, either.

"I prefer the kitchen in the cabana house, if you don't mind." Hannibal got to his feet, and Will followed suit. "The mansion is meant for entertaining, and it lacks intimacy. I thought you would be more comfortable in a smaller space."

They crossed back to the little house where Will had come from. The woman's chair was still empty, but the dog had returned, laying on her side by the door. She lifted her head as they approached, tail thumping against the ground.

"The creature of miracle," Hannibal said as Will stopped to pet her. She rolled onto her belly to have it scratched. "I've never seen her near the grounds before."

"I'm gonna put some water out for her," Will said as they went inside. Hannibal turned on a few more lights and gave Will a bowl from the kitchen that he filled from the tap and set

outside next to the dog. She got up and lapped at it immediately.

Will returned to find Hannibal rooting through the refrigerator, a cast-iron pan warming on the humble stove. He set some water to boil, then turned to rest his hips on the small tiled counter, facing Will, who had claimed a seat at the table.

“Are you, ah… n-no, um, permanent damage?” Will asked shyly, wincing at the memory of the broken wine bottle, and then the plate of glass shattering against the moonlight night.

“Francis’s intention wasn’t to kill me,” Hannibal said, checking the ripeness of several plantains that rested in a basket on the countertop. “Not with that shot. It was to incapacitate me. Have me out of his way.”

“That’s why you kept… standing in front of me like that,” Will mused, the disused cogs of his mind slowly grinding to life. “You were blocking his shot…?”

“While I can’t be certain,” Hannibal said, measuring out white rice from a container, “I believe he smelled a trap – that he would have to go through you to get to me.” The grains of rice whispered into the boiling water, a cascade of pearls. “He planned to shoot you first.” He stirred the rice with a wooden spoon, then lowered the heat and placed a cover over the pot. “I had to present a disruption. I hoped it would unbalance him enough that you might have a chance.”

“I didn’t draw fast enough,” Will said, running his hand over his face.

Hannibal hummed, peeling a plantain. “And how wonderful it was.”

Will said nothing.

“Imagine,” Hannibal suggested, setting the plantain on a cutting board, “if you’d merely put a bullet in his head. Pulling a trigger puts your intention into motion, but it does not commit the act.” He examined the edge of a knife and brought out the sharpener, sliding it along the blade’s edge. “Perhaps you wanted to be too slow. I certainly hope so.”

“I didn’t,” Will protested. “Not – not consciously.”

Hannibal washed the knife, then used it to slice the soft fruit into even rings. “Do you remember what you said?” he asked after a time. “When it was over? The Dragon slain?”

Will let the memories rise, shifting uncomfortably in the chair as they did so, one bubbling to the top, then another, and another. “I remember… gutting him. And I remember you tore his throat out… with your *teeth* .”

The tension in the room ticked up several degrees even as the ocean wind gliding through the kitchen continued to cool.

“That’s the last, ah… solidified image,” Will finished. “Are you going to tell me? Or make me wait until it comes back to me the way the lost time used to?”

Hannibal placed the plantains in the pan so they sizzled in the hot oil. Without looking at him, Hannibal said, “You told me it was beautiful.”

Will felt his heart shrink away, like an animal backing away from the bars of a cage. It took some time to coax it back out into the open. “It was,” he admitted.

Hannibal’s mouth quirked a smile he seemed unable to contain, and his brown eyes were tender as they met Will’s for a long moment. He looked away to flip the plantains and check the rice.

“How long?” Will asked.

“Ten minutes, give or take.”

“I’m gonna check on the dog. Maybe give her a quick bath.”

Hannibal’s smile was wider this time, but infinitely gentle. He nodded and Will got up to bring the dog inside. She had no hesitations about getting in the tub, and let Will rinse her with the movable shower head. He used a little dish soap and vinegar in lieu of dog shampoo, and she seemed to revel in being rubbed with the washcloth. He checked all of her foot pads, her eyes and ears. She needed a vet visit, of course, but seemed healthy enough. Will ran his hand along her belly as he washed, then chuckled to himself.

After toweling her off and rinsing the tub free of grime, Will returned to the kitchen, where Hannibal was just plating rice and plantains, with a fried egg on top. The dog went back to the verandah to lie down near the doorway again near the water bowl. “Well behaved,” Hannibal praised. “You’ve trained her already.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Will said, but he felt pride warm him nevertheless. “In other news, though, ah, she’s pregnant.”

“Ah.” Hannibal opened a small cabinet, revealing an art deco style bar full of glasses, backed by a spotless mirror. He poured them each a small glass of spiced rum and raised his to touch Will’s with a delicate ringing sound before they sat at the table. “Congratulations,” he called to the dog at the door, and they drank, Will through a smile he couldn’t control.

“She’ll need a vet visit sooner rather than later,” Will said as he pierced his egg with his fork. The rich, vibrant yolk seeped out to soak the rice. He realized just then he wasn’t just hungry, but ravenous. And, as usual, everything was too good for words. “That is, if you’re letting me keep her,” he managed between bites.

“It’s not a matter of letting anything,” Hannibal said as he cut into his plantain. “If you want her, she’s yours. Though as friendly as she is, do you think she belongs to someone?”

Will paused to chew before protesting, but Hannibal beat him to it. “As if that ever stopped you. The first night we met, you told me you stole a dog, do you remember?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Will said. “We were both a few sheets to the wind, but yes. And you told me the antelope head was fake.”

“Think of all the secrets that have passed between now and then,” Hannibal mused, chasing rice on his plate.

“Or *don't* ,” Will suggested, but it was through a smile, as wry as it was.

“There are others to be discovered, I’m sure.” Hannibal got up to clear the table. Will found himself on his feet, bringing his dishes to the sink as well. Hannibal gave him a softly amused glance. “Wash or dry, Will?”

“Uhm, either.”

Hannibal handed him a towel. Will felt strange, disconnected from the scene as if he was an observer instead of a participant in the domestic tableau. It seemed impossible that they were here, now, doing these mundane tasks, after everything. Will’s nerves spiked and he felt perspiration prickle his brow. Each time Hannibal handed him something to dry, Will snuck a glance at his face. How could someone so familiar seem so different? Granted, his perception of time was distorted, his brain most likely permanently altered from the kill and the fall, but it felt like a lifetime since they’d been together like this. Hannibal seemed leaner than Will remembered, his skin darkened from the sun and roughened by the sea. No doubt he was swimming in it for his exercise. His hair was longer than Will had ever seen it, and not grayer, as he had originally thought, but lightened, probably due to sun exposure. His eyes seemed different as well, a softer hue, more dark honey than ancient amber. His scent, the essence beneath all else, was simultaneously deliciously exotic and to-the-bone familiar. It left him shaky and uncertain.

Hannibal handed him the spatula and when Will took it, their fingers touched. Will jerked his hand away; the tool slipped between his wet fingers and clattered on the floor. “S-sorry-“ Will stuttered, bending to retrieve it. Hannibal took it from him and washed it again without comment.

“Are you tired?” Hannibal asked him as they put the final dishes away. “This much activity and conversation after such a long time locked in your mind might be exhausting for you.”

“Is that what I was?” Will wondered, half to himself, eyes focused on the dish towel in his hands. He raised his head and shook it. “I’m fine. I feel like I’ve been asleep the whole time.”

Hannibal poured two more small glasses of rum, neat. “Join me.” He stepped out the French doors to the back veranda and the patio beyond. Will followed after a quick check to see if the dog was still there. She was asleep, one of her legs twitching intermittently.

Hannibal had stretched out on a cushioned lounge with another pulled up close, the armrests nearly touching. The moon was rich and full, tossing her light like pieces of broken mirror on the ocean. Will waited to see Molly’s corpse in his mind, changed by the Dragon, with silver-shard eyes ringed in blood. But it didn’t come. He thought about thinking about it, but it didn’t come.

He sank down on the other lounge and stretched his legs out. Hannibal handed him his drink. The moon was bright enough that they could see the waves foam up on the sand. “Where are we?” he asked after taking a drink of the smooth spiced liquor.

Hannibal's left brow hitched up, a minuscule movement. "An island," he answered, "Not far from Havana."

"Huh," was all Will could think to say. He thought about inquiring after the specifics of how they'd gotten here, but it wasn't important, not really.

"I'm working on and off in the city," Hannibal told him, staring out over the ocean, giving Will a clean view of his profile. It made his stomach take a dive and heat rise to his face. "The public healthcare system here supports many; some with financial or social influence would rather have a private physician. In turn, my patients use their influence to protect our lives here."

"What about… the FBI? The CIA can come into other countries and extract…" Will stopped himself with a sardonic chuckle. "That didn't go so well last time, though, did it?"

"We're safe, Will. That's all you need to know, at least for tonight."

After a little silence, a figure appeared on the beach, her white dress emitting an unearthly glow. It was the woman, her baby asleep inside the little mauve cottage, perhaps, where there were still dim lights and voices. She was combing the beach, picking up shells and stones and slipping them into her pockets. Pulling a knife from her belt, she lifted it to the moon and called out over the expanse of blue black waves. Will didn't understand the words; even at this distance he could tell it wasn't Spanish.

"What's she saying?" Will wondered softly, as though they might be overheard.

"I don't know," Hannibal said. "The language is called Lucumí. It's derived from Yoruba, brought here by the transatlantic slave trade."

Will felt like he should understand, but a connection eluded him. Then his mind offered up words like Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure.

"She practices Santería?" Will shifted, lifting one of his knees so his bare foot was flat against the cushion.

"You're familiar?"

"It's similar in some ways to, ah… practices in the southern United States. New Orleans in particular. Combining Roman Catholicism with West African spiritual traditions."

"She was living here when we arrived," Hannibal went on. "With her children. Expelled, it seems, from the town nearby." He glanced over at Will, the glint of amusement reflecting in his eyes on the same spectrum as the moonlight. "For witchcraft," he said. "Santería itself is accepted, for the most part. Apparently she follows no doctrine and pulls from whatever folk or ceremonial magic suits her. This has, apparently, made her an outcast. She calls herself a *bruja* ."

All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story.

“Naturally I asked her to stay,” Hannibal said and Will couldn’t help the reflexive smile that crossed his face. “I had the caretaker’s cottage refurbished and expanded. And I asked her to help me watch over you.”

“Do I call her *bruja* , or does she have a name?”

“Names have significance in certain traditions. I’ll let her decide if she’ll tell you hers.” His voice had the same tinge of irony that it always did when discussing matters of religion, but he added, “I wouldn’t want to risk a curse. Not now, after she’s proven her power.”

“Proven her power?”

“Indeed, Will. Yesterday the three of us had a meal together. She said her baby wasn’t sleeping well, and she was tired of keeping watch at night to make sure you didn’t wander off. She informed me that she would be returning your spirit to your body tonight so she could get some rest.”

The woman on the beach suddenly straightened her back and turned, looking directly at them, somehow alerted to their topic of conversation. Hannibal raised a hand. She turned back to her work without acknowledgement, then made her way back toward her cottage.

“What a… coincidence,” Will tried, though it felt ridiculous to try and rationalize a miracle. Hannibal might resist the implication, but Will accepted that this was what had happened to him, folded it into his private mythology.

“I hadn’t thought to try and use a dog’s bark as a stimulus,” Hannibal commented, leaning his head back to look at the sky’s expanse. “Then again, I haven’t been myself since that night.” He finished his drink quickly, without the usual relish of taste that Will was so used to seeing. It was jarring, and it opened something in him, a tiny slit through which light appeared. Will put his hand on the armrest, and slowly rotated his arm so it sat palm up. Hannibal looked at it for a long moment, then, moving with the same deliberation, he slid his hand into Will’s.

Will felt a tremor work through him as their hands clasped, followed by a blaze of liquid heat like melted gold flowing over his skin. He realized, looking at their entwined fingers, that his hand had steadied. It was Hannibal’s that was trembling, ever so slightly, until it too stilled, the ripples from a drop of water easing their way out.

“I need to tell you something,” Will said.

Hannibal squeezed his hand briefly, a gentle, reassuring press.

“I remember something else. I, ah… I remember falling. I remember holding onto you. And I remember what I was thinking… as we fell.” He looked at the moon now. It seemed impossible that it was the same satellite that shone on them the night of the Dragon’s demise, making the red blood liquid onyx. “I told myself that… this was it. This was the last time… I tried to kill you. I promised myself – i-if we survived, that I wouldn’t… that I was done fighting you, Hannibal.” His words dried up, mind suddenly filled with static. He felt his breath catch and he inhaled sharply before letting the air out slowly. “And we’re alive. So.” He left it at that, unable to continue. Silence reigned.

“Outcomes are something I often explore,” Hannibal said at last. “A mental exercise before an event. It allows me to anticipate possibilities and adjust accordingly.’

Will nodded, looking at their hands where they rested, then back at Hannibal, who wore an expression of earnestness that seemed like it belonged to someone else. Vulnerability.

“I calculated your demise,” he admitted. “I didn’t want it to happen, of course, but I had to account for it in order to try and prevent it. I imagined what it might be like. Then, it happened.”

It was Will’s turn to squeeze his hand as a tear, then another, dropped from the side of Hannibal’s eye over the textured skin there. “I was not prepared. It was more than what was imaginable. The fear — the grief — I’d never experienced anything like it.” He swept his hand over his eyes. “Not since Mischa.”

“You told me,” Will said, just loud enough to be heard over the ocean, “That we’re family.”

“I…,” Hannibal said, then paused, “was incapacitated. While I knew I would feel sorrow, I couldn’t fathom the sensation of complete *unmaking* . And after, when you lived but wouldn’t speak, I wondered: did I drown that night? Does Hell in fact exist, and was this to be my torment?”

“The divine punishment of a sinner mirrors the sin being punished.” Will had to look away, back at the ocean

Hannibal seemed to contemplate this for a time. “I have committed what some would consider a laundry list of sins. My greatest, the one I feel most keenly – is loving you, Will, but never saying the words. I withheld them from you for reasons that now seem distant and insignificant. There was very nearly a version of reality in which you would have never heard me say them. For us, that version of reality ceases to exist tonight.” Hannibal took a breath and lifted Will’s hand to his lips. He kissed it, held it in both of his own, and looked Will in the eye. “I love you, Will.”

Will felt himself tremble again, consumed by a sudden panic and sense of displacement, that he had just seen and heard something otherworldly, that could not exist. Flipping through pictures and finding a ghost, or a leviathan breaking the surface of a mundane lake.

“And,” Hannibal went on, after what felt like an infinite silence, “I would like your permission to pursue you in courtship.”

“W-what?” Will stuttered, flinching. Hannibal let go of his hand and Will reclaimed it. “But we’ve already – uh, we’re already…”

“All favors unfairly won,” Hannibal admitted with the tilt of his head. “I want to claim them fairly, on my merits, not my machinations for your Becoming or your clutches for balance.”

“Oh.” Will looked out to the sea again, his head full of echoes, his heart slamming against his ribs, a hot blush crawling up his neck and cheeks.

“Will,” Hannibal said, catching his gaze again. “You can say ‘no.’ I mean that.”

“I’m not saying ‘no’.” Will’s words were in a rush to tumble from his mouth. “That’s not what I’m, um…”

“Not saying ‘no’ is not the same as saying ‘yes.’” He studied Will’s reaction with canny eyes. “You don’t have to answer me now-“

“Yes,” Will blurted. His face burned hotter and he cast his gaze down, studying the pattern on the cushioned arm of the chaise lounge. He risked a peek and saw Hannibal’s half-smile curling up and further endowing the lines at the corners of his eyes, so fetching, Will thought, that he wouldn’t dare think of them as crow’s feet. “I mean, uhm… y-you can. If you want.” He shook his head, tongue-tied and sweating.

“More than anything.” Hannibal’s voice was low, humbled.

“All right, uh…” Will said after a laden silence. “Should we, ah… go… inside…?”

Hannibal stood, and offered Will his hand. Will took it and got to his feet, nerves vibrating like tightly-wound instrument strings just plucked. “Courtship, Will. Not merely sating physical desires.”

Will floundered. Fuck, he felt like a kid in gym class walking past a group of girls wearing athletic shorts. Despite everything they’d done. Despite *everything.* The sex, blood, death, beauty, pain. All of it, and now it was like starting over.

“I have to go to the mainland tomorrow to see a patient,” Hannibal said, back to his usual mild cadence. “I’ll bring some things for the dog when I return. May I visit you in the evening?”

“S-sure.” Will nodded, tonguing the scar inside his mouth.

Hannibal took his hand once more and pressed it between both of his own in a warm, comforting grip, his touch lingering even after he’d released Will’s fingers. “Until then. Goodnight, Will.”

Season 4 Episode 2: Creyentes

Chapter Summary

It's been 3 weeks since Will woke up in Cuba under Hannibal's care. Since then, despite their long and storied sexual history, they've barely touched. Will receives a formal invitation to dinner. There are three place settings...

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Break the Silence” – Palace

“I want to see
In your soul
I want to tame
This animal
Give me shame
You show me lies
I want to change
My alibis
Whoa
Cheated, always loved you
Broken hearts who rumble
Feasted on foundations
Bathed in blood of angels
Found you out, your weakness
Drowned you out, I'm sleepless
Leave my mind, your feeding
On my heart
So break the silence
Give me a reason
We had creedence
Now we're poisoned
So break the silence
Just give me a reason
We had creedence
Now we're poisoned
I want to feel
How it's true
These chemicals
In me and you
I want to fight
With desire

I want to burn
In your fire, ooh
Cheated, always loved you
Broken hearts who rumble
Feasted on foundations
Bathed in blood
So break the silence
Give me a reason
We had creedence
Now we are poisoned
So break the silence
Just give me a reason
We had creedence
Now we're poisoned, yeah”

“Billy!”

Will’s head shot up from where he leaned his cheek on his scuffed knee.

“Biiilllyyy!”

He scrambled to his feet. “C’mon, Bandit!” he cried over the symphony of insects that serenaded the edge of the swamp, the gnarled branches overhead their bandshell. “Bandit, come!”

Bandit clambered through the underbrush to join him as he raced full-tilt down the dirt road back to the trailer. Mama was stretched out on the concrete stoop next to Miss June, each of them wielding a beer and a cigarette.

“Mama!” Will broke the treeline, shaking with excitement. “Mama, I saw a garter snake have her babies!”

Miss June grimaced, but Mama grinned. “How many did she have?”

“Twenty-six!”

“Lord, can you imagine twenty-six kids?” Mama elbowed Miss June and they laughed exhausted, half-humorous chuckles. “S’pose she don’t gotta raise ‘em. I got my hands full enough with you.” Mama said it through a smirk. She flicked her cigarette and used her free hand to give him a brief hug, looping her arm under his and splaying her hand between his skinny shoulder blades. “G’on and wash up. It’s time for bed.” She pressed a smoky kiss into his dark curls. Will’s heart flourished, as fertile as the snake had been. Mama didn’t often hug or kiss.

Will hopped up between the two women and banged open the door to the little trailer.

“Not you,” he heard Mama scold Bandit through a laugh, blocking the dog with a long bare leg.

The cluttered interior of the trailer dissolved like a drop of ink in a glass of water and he was back in the swamp, under the old cypress tree, its branches bridal veils of Spanish moss. Bandit barked up ahead, pawing the ground, showing him where to find the mother snake…

The creak of the bed frame and the added pressure to the mattress woke him. Will sighed into the pillow as Luz flopped over on his legs and rested her head against the rise of his backside. “No dogs in the bed,” he muttered, but made no attempt to move her, or himself, until he nearly fell back to sleep. Instead, he forced himself to stay awake, a blunt denial of his body’s desire. He turned over, slowly enough that Luz could get out of the way and take up a new position right next to him, head on the pillow like she was people. “You are spoiled, little mama,” he said, forcing his good-natured words and smile. Anything to chase away the vision, the dream he had every night since he’d come out of the shell of his mind.

Will knew that almost all near-death experiences could be written off as hypoxia threatening the brain, hallucinations overwhelming consciousness as the body’s essential systems shut down. People who survived major medical ordeals described feelings of peace, the white light, even traveling to Heaven to see friends and loved ones. It was worth nothing that very few people woke up and said they’d gone to Hell.

The vision he’d had after hitting the water wasn’t anything like walking up to the pearly gates, or flying through the clouds, or stepping through a portal to greet everyone he’d lost along the way. This was a memory that had come back to him in death, and insisted on looping in his head as he slept. Neurons that fire together wire together. It had dug a groove in his mind like colonists’ wagon wheel ruts over the unspoiled prairie, off to steal some land.

These were the things Will told himself. But somehow he couldn’t believe them, not entirely. His mind instinctively wanted to accept that Magdaly put his soul back into his body, rescuing it from… wherever it was.

And that Hannibal had dragged him out of Heaven.

“I gotta stop having that dream,” he said, more to himself than to the dog. Will sighed again and pulled Luz close, pressing his face on the top of her head and gently rubbing her belly where the puppies were growing.

Hannibal had, as promised, brought home a collar, bowls, brushes, a bed (she never used), along with various other pet supplies. He’d also arranged for a vet from Havana to make a house call last week, and though an ultrasound wasn’t possible, she was confident the pregnancy was going well. Luz was about four weeks in and getting more lazy and affectionate by the day.

And hungrier. Luz whined and snuggled in, only to twist and lick his face or paw him when he stopped moving.

Message received. He got out of bed to make her breakfast, which he did every day from ingredients prepped ahead of time. While the coffee brewed, Will mixed cooked cassava, beef, eggs, and rice, and then warmed them up in a pan, tossing in a handful of herbs. Spoiled little mama liked everything blended and to her preferred temperature.

Will was still getting used to the espresso maker, and was in no way skilled enough to make the special little café Cubanos Hannibal created every morning. He stuck to café con leche, but it was still the best coffee he'd ever had, no contest. And on the few mornings when Hannibal stopped by, what he created for Will was dark magic.

It was his routine to drink it out on the back deck with Luz once she finished her breakfast. Checking the time, he hurried out, then tried to look like he was in no hurry at all as he crossed the deck to stand at the farthest corner, presumably to take in the tranquil morning sea.

Perfect timing. Hannibal was just getting out of the water, walking back up to the palm tree with a nail in it where he hung his robe, a thin, white thing that clung to his body, especially when it was wet. Will was in the right position to get a glorious eyeful, savoring the moments as Hannibal crossed the sand to the tree to get his shoes and the robe, towel around his neck, wearing nothing but the little dark blue bathing shorts, hair slicked back with ocean water.

Will was transfixed, as he was every morning, the coffee forgotten in his hand, watching the dappled shade on Hannibal's skin as he walked back up the sandy dirt path toward the houses. As he approached Will's back deck, Will did as he did every day, and sat in one of the wicker chairs, opening a book, coffee at his side, waiting for the customary greeting and conversation he savored.

"Good morning, Will."

Will glanced up from the book as if he'd been engrossed in it. "Morning," he said, getting up to stand by the railing, coffee cup casually in hand as he leaned his elbows on it.

There was something about how Hannibal looked up at him from the path below, the adoring smile on his face somehow indicative of a pleasant secret. Will looked forward to it far more than he would admit to anyone but himself, and maybe Luz.

"Did you sleep well?" Hannibal lifted the towel and pressed it against his hair for a moment. Disheveled with wind and water, uncombed and haphazardly parted, it called to Will's memories like a siren to sailors. The times they'd fooled around in the shower in particular came to mind, so many inches of bare wet flesh and damp, tousled hair.

Will almost forgot to answer. "Yeah, you?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Headed in today?" Will raised his cup and drank from it, a calculated casual gesture, trying to buy himself a few more moments before Hannibal was on his way again.

"I have a new patient," Hannibal told him. "He's an American."

“What’s he doing here?”

“Much the same as we are,” Hannibal said.

Will nodded his understanding. A fellow fugitive. But someone with money. Hannibal did not ply his trade for less than what he thought his services were worth.

“Do you need anything from the city?” Hannibal asked, running his hand through his damp hair. His forearms would be the death of Will one of these days.

“No, but Magdaly said something last night about a school uniform for Alejandra.”

“I’ll speak with her before I go,” Hannibal promised. “Enjoy your day, Will.”

Will made a sound of assent and turned away, despite his powerful compulsion to vault the deck railing and throw himself into Hannibal’s arms, to feel his sea-cooled skin and kiss the salt from his lips and throat. When he reclaimed his seat and half-heartedly picked up the book, he realized from the positioning that he’d probably been holding it upside down when pretending to read it. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” he hissed under his breath at himself, rubbing his forehead. When he looked at Luz, she seemed to be grinning, tongue out, head cocked, as if to say, *do you know how silly you are?*

Three weeks. Three maddening weeks since his awakening where Hannibal had done nothing except hold his hand. While they saw each other daily, they spent real time together infrequently, Will forced to subsist on small interactions like catching Hannibal after his morning swim. On a few occasions, Hannibal had stopped by to make him café Cubano or to have an after-dinner drink.

They’d had lunch, once, out on the veranda. Will couldn’t remember exactly what Hannibal had brought for them to eat, but vividly recalled how he’d put his hand on Will’s shoulder when leaning in to pour him a glass of chicha de piña. The touch was arbitrary, Hannibal steadying himself while holding the full pitcher, but it had blazed through Will’s skin. And he knew, without any doubt, that it had affected Hannibal as well. When the glass was full, he’d brushed the tips of his fingers across the back of Will’s neck, his forefinger tracing along the base of his hairline. And then the hand was gone, as if Hannibal had checked himself. Will had felt the surge of triumph he remembered from when he was able to disrupt Hannibal’s complete control of his own mind and body, followed by the deepest frustration he’d ever known.

He wanted more. Everything, all of it, again. But he also saw the logic behind doing things right this time.

As right as two murderers could do anything.

After coffee, he took Luz on a walk up the beach. Almost every day, without fail, as he passed Magdaly’s cottage, Alejandra would run out over the sand and catch up to him, forcing him to stop and let her pet the dog and ask him a series of breathless questions. The topics varied from day to day, but the curious 7-year-old always had something on her mind.

“In the USA,” she led with on this particular day, “do the children wear uniforms to school?”

“Some of them do,” Will said, watching as the lanky child offered Luz a piece of driftwood to chew on. “It depends on if the school is, uh, public or private.”

“What does that mean?” Her English had grown rapidly since they’d started these little question and answer sessions. Magdaly wanted her to learn, although Will was happy to brush up on his Spanish, too. It’d been a long time since high school when he’d studied it, and New Orleans, where he sometimes spoke it to citizens he encountered as part of NOLA PD.

“Public schools are free, and private schools cost money.”

“Why would you pay for school? What’s wrong with the other schools? Do they have lunch there? What does a girl my age learn about?” On and on with the questions Will tried to answer until Magdaly came to his rescue, calling Alejandra to come home and help with the baby.

After the walk was the workout. Hannibal had prescribed a series of physical therapy exercises for his shoulders in particular, due to the staggering amount of damage they’d sustained over the years. Two shootings and two stabbings, but who was counting? There was a room in the back of the mansion that served as a gym, with weights, benches, and a treadmill. Will had started only doing the work on his injuries, but soon found himself seeking more. He hadn’t worked out like this since the police academy days, and he wasn’t anywhere near his peak performance. Years had passed, and he’d just spent eight weeks as a veritable zombie. But he could sense improvement. Even though it seemed ridiculous to him, preening and vain, a young man’s worry, when Hannibal did eventually see him without his clothes, he wanted to have some definition again.

The afternoons were too hot for much more than reading or napping. Either way, Luz was there, enjoying the cool floor tiles. One morning Will had found a book on Cuban insect species sitting on the veranda table outside the front door. The note from Hannibal simply said, “happy hunting.” Another morning it was some basic fishing gear. “I’m no expert, but we will expand your collection over time. Perhaps one day you’ll take me with you.” Now it was part of Will’s routine as well, fishing the shore for Palometa when the mood struck him, usually in the evenings, assuming he could slip by Magdaly’s house without Alejandra seeing him.

It was tempting to befriend the mother and her children. Magdaly never spoke of any man in her life. But Molly and Walter were still a sore spot. More than that; they were a wound sewn together by gossamer threads that threatened to break if he thought about them too long or too hard. And Magdaly seemed completely unconcerned with Will now that he was awake. He lived self-sufficiently; he knew she did work up at the mansion for Hannibal, but he was left to his own devices when it came to domestic tasks, an arrangement he was more than satisfied with. Magdaly was unbothered by Will’s existence unless she needed something. On a few occasions when the baby was teething, she’d brought him a basket of wet laundry and pointed out the clotheslines behind her house. It had been Will’s pleasure to help — hanging Hannibal’s clothes up to dry in the sun and breeze felt sweetly intimate, an act of service that spoke of affection.

It felt so good, in fact, that Will found himself looking for any chance he could to do something *for* Hannibal, as silly as it was, as if Hannibal wasn't capable of anything and everything. Still, he sought it out, finding a ladder in the gardener's shed to replace a burnt-out light bulb in the music room, re-hanging a broken window shutter, and tightening up a wobbly veranda chair. None of these things were asked of him, but he felt driven to do them, even if Hannibal wasn't home, wouldn't see, likely wouldn't notice.

Once the island had slipped out of the clutches of the day's heat, Will stepped out onto the front veranda with his insect book, hoping to catch Hannibal after he returned from the mainland, or at least see him passing by in the window of the music room. He was greeted instead by Luz, who trotted out of the back door of the mansion, through the garden, and right to Will's feet. "How'd you get in there?" Will demanded. "No dogs in the big house, you know that."

As he folded forward to pet her, Will noticed something on her collar. It was a small piece of paper rolled into a scroll shape, affixed under Luz's chin with a length of delicate ivory ribbon. Will's first thought was that it was Magdaly-related; he sometimes stumbled upon evidence of her practice; candle stubs on the beach or at the bases of trees, a few cut flowers, or a pile of coins.

The last thing he wanted to do was disturb anything of hers, but the ribbon was loosely tied and likely to fall off the first time Liz scratched herself. Against his better judgment, he pulled the bow, releasing the tube of paper, and unrolled it.

It was Hannibal's handwriting, his distinctive Old World calligraphy.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Requests the pleasure of your company for dinner

Tomorrow night at 8:00 pm

Formal dress

Please R.S.V.P.

Will let out a disbelieving little laugh, the sum of his anxious but pleasant anticipation, running a hand through his hair. Of course an invitation like this would be coming sooner or later.

The flutter of his heart stilled, its wing-movements now as steady as an alligator gliding along the surface of the swamp with just its eyes showing. He silently acknowledged the possibility the question would not be *what* they were having for dinner, but *whom* .

***

Will had spent most of the day shifting between restlessness, cold-blooded calm, and a kind of sweet recklessness flavored with pleasure. He blindly followed his routine until evening, when he at last opened the armoire. His confidence that there was something within that fulfilled the dress requirement was confirmed as he thumbed through the hanging clothing. Light khaki-colored linen pants, a crisp, pale blue button-down shirt, and a lavender-blue suit jacket made of lightweight but sculpted fabric were all hanging together, the top of the clothing hangers joined by the casual loop of a belt around all three; a nudge in the right direction. Will felt a smile pull on the corner of his mouth. Another very Hannibal fucking Lecter thing to do.

Luz watched him from the doorway of the bathroom as he stood at the mirror, running the razor carefully over his neck. It was not the only hair on his body he'd landscaped. Not that he was getting his hopes up.

Fuck it, he was getting his hopes up. And that resulted in needing a stiff drink before he left.

There was a shift in the atmosphere around the compound where they lived. It felt beautifully shadowed, otherworldly, the stars stretched overhead, the rough call of the sea and insects creating a layered tapestry of sound. The mansion was softly lit from within, the entire first floor illuminated, and the door through which Will would enter into the soaring foyer was flanked on either side by decorative lanterns, their clear glass protecting flickering candles.

Torches anchored into the muddy ground burned on either side of the doorway, spitting and hissing in the rain. He passed between them and out into the dark.

Will reeled momentarily, grappling with the feeling that if he stepped through that door, the mansion's interior would be the Norman Chapel in Palermo. Hannibal, moving from shrine to shrine, snuffing candles. Instead of letting it destabilize him, or force him to question reality, Will leaned into the feeling. A drop on a roller coaster felt different than a drop in an airplane, even if the physics were the same. He walked up the path and let himself sink into pleased expectancy.

Hannibal opened the door just as he passed between the lanterns. Will's mind briefly interposed dozens of memories of Hannibal opening the door to the office in Baltimore to admit him. Their first therapy session. Another where he admitted he liked killing Garret Jacob Hobbs, the revelation leading to a panic attack and a kiss. Hannibal's expression when he'd opened the door to see Will, fresh out of the Baltimore State Hospital, wearing the clothes he'd sent. And now Hannibal, welcoming him into the Florentine-style mansion, dressed in a tan seersucker suit and flawless white shirt with gleaming dark shoes. His tie was a vibrant aqua blue, the same color as their strip of ocean during the day, speckled with burgundy paisley, and his pocket square was butter-canary silk.

This was his Hannibal, gorgeous and buttoned and cinched up, hair done, emitting a rich and complex scent of his body, cologne, and whatever food he'd been prepping, a pillar of quiet self control with lust and violence lurking just under the surface.

"Good evening, Will." Even his voice was somehow more familiar now, sounding so similar to how he'd greeted Will the night he'd shown up with Randall Tier's quadriceps to cook,

echoing not just the words but the sheer delight of the moment and what it meant. He stood back and let Will enter the foyer. It was not the foyer of the memory palace, which was mildly disappointing, but the grand space was also lit by candles in strategic places, their undulating light glimmering on the marble stairs, the bronze statues uplit like they were moments from telling a campfire story.

“This color suits you even better than I thought it would.” Hannibal reached out and Will immediately stepped closer, a reflex. He was rewarded with a gentle touch on the lapel of his jacket as Hannibal ran the fabric between his thumb and the side of his forefinger. Will was momentarily shocked by his visceral reaction to the touch, though they hadn’t even come into contact, not really. His mind immediately transposed the connection onto his own skin or hair, conjuring what it might feel like to have those skillful fingers caress any part of his body again with such reverence. “It encourages your eyes to reflect their blue quality over green,” Hannibal said, after what seemed to Will like a liquid moment frozen.

“You look…uhm…” Will hadn’t planned on blushing the literal first minute of their evening together, but it was beyond his control. “Like yourself,” was what he came up with.

“Thank you. I take that as a compliment and a comfort,” Hannibal replied. “Please.” He held out his hand toward the pocket doors on the right side of the foyer that mirrored the one that led to the music room.

Hannibal slid the doors open with a little more force than was necessary, making them part with a subtle flourish.

The dining room was candlelit as well, an airy, elegant, yet intimate space, the large windows curtained off, walls painted a subtle cream. It was dominated by a lovely mid-century table with curved legs and gold accents, its surface arranged with candles, gleaming glassware, flowers, and a steaming centerpiece – some kind of meat wrapped in leaves.

The table was set for *three* . Two seats were empty, on the end and in the center. The third place, at the far end of the table, was occupied.

Bedelia Du Maurier.

Will felt Hannibal’s steady hand on his shoulder, his breath flowing gently over the back of his ear. Time liquefied and froze once more as Will took in the scene. Without his consent, as though it were some kind of natural reflex, he felt the ambient pulse whir to life, bringing him into Hannibal’s design. Bedelia sat as primly as ever, hair fixed, makeup on, though her eyes were wet and cloudy like oppressive weather. She was dressed in a stunning blue beaded evening gown. The slit up the side was carefully positioned to reveal the bandaged stump of her leg, amputated above the knee. Will’s mind showed him, in grotesque reverse, how she had come to be this way. Hannibal bending over her prostrate body with the whirring saw, blood splattering against the side of his face. Bedelia anesthetized but conscious, seated half-upright, a medical mask over her face, observing helplessly as Hannibal removed her leg with surgical precision.

Bedelia turned to watch as they came through the doors, Hannibal sliding them shut behind. Her misty gaze sharpened a few degrees and she blinked, long and slow, as if trying to be

sure what she was seeing was real. Will noted the size of her pupils and assumed she had been given some kind of opiates for the pain, and who knew what else to keep her agreeable. "Well," she sighed as Hannibal pulled out Will's chair for him and made a chivalrous show of helping him slide it up to the table. "If it isn't the Bride of Frankenstein. Bluebeard's final wife. The acolyte."

"Dr. Du Maurier," Will greeted curtly. It didn't make sense, what with her cooked leg sitting in the center of the table, surrounded by carefully placed roses and tropical fruits, but he still suffered the gnaw of jealousy he'd felt ever since she'd been with Hannibal in Florence.

"You seem decidedly less *twitchy* than when I saw you last." Bedelia raised a graceful hand to her hair, brushing it back over her shoulder.

"Three months in a tropical paradise can have that effect," Will said, raising his chin a few degrees and tilting his head.

"How nice for you," she replied, each word edged with poison.

Will turned to Hannibal, who was uncorking a bottle of sparkling white wine. "You've, ah, outdone yourself with the centerpiece."

"Striking, isn't it? The leg is wrapped in ti leaves to seal in the moisture. The meat was roasted for hours in a barbecue pit with a chocolate-coffee infusion. The citrus will bring out the brightness in the flavors. And Bedelia is having oysters caught fresh today." Hannibal came to Will's side and poured his wine first, just a few sips, and encouraged him to try it. It was fruity without being too sweet.

"That's good," Will said, setting the glass down for Hannibal to fill again, more this time.

"Yes, I think it will pair nicely. I'm sorry, Bedelia, but the medications I've prescribed for you don't mix with alcohol." Hannibal returned to his place and poured his own glass.

"Pity." Bedelia's foggy eyes tracked Hannibal as he came around the chairless side of the table to unwrap the end of the leg, carefully folding down the vibrant green leaves. The rich, succulent scent of the escaping steam wafted to Will's nose and he inhaled appreciatively.

"In Hawai'i, the ti plant has many uses, culinary and otherwise," Hannibal noted as he adjusted the decorative elements of the centerpiece to give him better access to the meat. "To wear it in a garland around the neck brings good luck and good health. It is sacred to Laka – " he paused to glance up from his work and lock eyes with Will. "-a love goddess."

"And what are these?" Will gestured to a little arrangement of blackberries on a separate plate. They were positioned so the wider ends were downward, balanced delicately on little lavender stalks of various sizes. "They look like mushrooms."

"Indeed." Hannibal lifted the carving knife and fork. As he pierced the meat, savory juices flowed forth, tinged with red. "The stems are made of marzipan. I created them to honor a departed acquaintance. I received word that Mr. Eldon Stammets was stabbed to death in prison last week."

“Really?” Will raised his eyebrows, then scoffed, but gently. “Can’t say I’m… overwrought. He tried to kill Abigail, remember?”

“Where he failed,” Bedelia piped up in her biting, drugged drawl, aiming her arrows at Hannibal, “you succeeded.”

Hannibal ignored her, speaking only to Will. “I remember. And you saved her. If we cannot mourn the man, we can mourn his ideas – his design. The concept of connection, harnessing the biological speech of the humble but marvelous mushroom. They are edible, Will, if you would like to try one. The marzipan is flavored with vanilla, cinnamon, clove, and orange peel.”

Will reached out and gently plucked one up from the dish. He passed it through his lips and chewed, noting the burst of berry flavor mixing with the nutty sweet of the marzipan. “Mmm.”

“I’ve accepted that those might be the only mushrooms you’ll ever eat,” Hannibal said, a bit of good-natured scolding. “As I recall, the Stammets case put you off mushrooms for good.”

“I’m sure you could… train me again.” Will tried another of the artificial fungi.

“Hannibal.” Bedelia half-slurred his name. “Despite my condition, if the two of you are going to flirt so palpably in my presence, I will require a drink. Perhaps… several.”

“Perhaps one glass,” Hannibal relented. Will watched him set his carving tools to the side for a moment to bring it to her. Things went liquid-frozen again as the ambient pulse beat through his mind. He entered Bedelia’s point of view, seeing the table as she would, staring at the roast, its bones protruding, knowing it was once a part of her own body. He could feel the abject horror, the pain of her phantom limb, the sense of staring through blackness toward a back-lit abomination whose true dimensions could only be hypothesized.

Will realized he had a choice. He could empathize with her, or he could simply turn his mind the other direction. Instead, he beheld Hannibal, and let his design saturate his brain instead. Bedelia had been an ally, given wise counsel when needed, and had asked the questions Hannibal needed to be asked in order to open up his own understanding. For that, she would be fondly remembered and well treated up until the end, her slow consumption horrific but painless. She would die because she schemed, because she thought too highly of herself, because she had played a game and lost. She was food, her body meant to nourish and support just as her therapy once had. Within each of them, she would always be tucked safely away, traveling with them for the rest of their lives.

The deepest insult, however, was not merely being eaten; it was that Hannibal planned to share every morsel with Will, his chosen companion. They’d both been his bride, perhaps, but there was only one he loved, considered an equal.

The design was perfect. Extreme acts of cruelty that required a high degree of empathy. Without empathy, one would never really know how to inflict the perfect poetic justice. Lucifer, Will realized, must empathize perfectly with sinners in order to punish them in a way that exquisitely mirrored the sin being punished.

He is the Devil… he is smoke.

Will saw the naked, savage disdain in Bedelia's eyes as Hannibal came closer.

He moved without realizing he'd moved. Hannibal had come with the bottle to fill Bedelia's glass, and she'd brandished the oyster fork, aiming for his neck. But Will was there, his fingers locked around her wrist. She gasped and pulled against him, but his grip and stance were immobile. Hannibal leaned over and plucked the utensil from her shaky fingers and stepped back out of reach. Only then did Will release his hold. Bedelia reclaimed her arm with as much dignity as she could muster, rubbing the skin where Will's hand had come into contact as if it was stained, soiled.

Hannibal set down the wine and righted Will's chair, which had tipped over when he'd vaulted from it. "Will," he said after a few moments of waiting.

Will backed away warily from Bedelia, who was perched elegantly in her chair as if nothing had happened, his eyes never leaving her face. He was more than ready to pounce again if she made any kind of threatening move. Hannibal pushed his chair in for him once more, then rested his hand for a few sublime moments against Will's shoulder where it sloped up into his neck. His touch was pure honeyed heat. "Well done," he complimented before resuming his carving. "I hadn't noticed the fork was missing."

"It's not like you to overlook something like that," Will said as Hannibal came to his side again with a plate of meat and vegetables from the covered dish on the sideboard.

"I will admit I've been preoccupied since your arrival, Will." Hannibal smiled at him as he plated another portion.

Bedelia made a soft sound of vexation and lifted her wine to her lips for a long drink.

At last, they picked up their forks and tasted the first few bites. The meat was so tender it flaked apart, lean but mouthwateringly juicy. Will could easily taste the complex flavors of chocolate and coffee, the acidic zest of citrus provided by the orange and lemon; not, he thought, from the fear hormones of the animal. Much mellower in flavor than the bright, tangy terror that had infused Randall Tier's flesh.

He closed his eyes to gather every flavor, closing out all distractions for a few moments. When he opened them, Hannibal was gazing at him with one of his very private smiles. Will felt simultaneously venerated and vulnerable under its weight.

"Well?" Hannibal asked after a sip of wine. Will followed suit to test the pairing.

"It's incredible," Will said, watching as his words conjured a certain light in Hannibal's eyes that shone in the dark parts that did not reflect the candle flames. "I've never tasted so many different but… *distinctive* flavors like this."

"Thank you, Will." Hannibal smiled down at his plate now, cutting another piece.

“Behind the veil at last, are we?” Bedelia tipped her head back to drain her glass before clanking it clumsily back onto the table with drugged, sluggish fingers. “Is it everything you dreamed of?”

“I never dreamed of it,” Will said after he’d finished chewing. “That, ah, makes it sound like an-an aspiration. An achievement. A contest where I had to get you out of my way.” He paused to take another bite. “There was never a contest.”

Bedelia gave him a withering look, but when she turned her glance at Hannibal, it was obdurate and frigid. “You realize,” Bedelia said to Will, her eyes hooded, half-closed, “that he’s enjoying our little spat. Sparring over him.”

“You were always a very observant therapist, Bedelia,” Hannibal said after dabbing his mouth with his napkin, his eyes glimmering with humor.

“There was never a method to duplicate your malleability in a way that was suitable.” She gave Will a brittle little smile. “I suppose my sense of self was too resolute for Hannibal’s tastes.” She glared balefully as Will worked on cleaning his plate. “You realize Hannibal constructed you to be what you’ve become. Perhaps you are more akin to Frankenstein’s monster, sewn together, made of the defective parts cast off from other killers. A patchwork fiend that will, one day, destroy its master.”

“I think we’ve spent quite enough time trying to destroy one another,” Hannibal said, edging vegetables onto his fork. “Lest we forget, none of us is getting any younger. More wine, Will?”
“Yes, thanks.” Will watched him whisper the pale liquid into the crystal glass, and thanked him again with a wider smile before turning back to Bedelia, the pleasant expression flickering away the way shadows do when light moves. “I recall you telling me once that my, ah… experience of Hannibal’s attention was so… *profoundly* harmful, yet so irresistible-” he glanced Hannibal’s way and caught him so enraptured with what Will was about to say that he’d paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, “that it undermined my ability to think rationally. But tell me, then, Bedelia – how’d *you* get caught? And, ah… wind up more *scarred* than I am?”

Bedelia’s hand, which rested on the tablecloth, curled into a knotted fist. She sat in stony refusal, until she seemed unable to stop herself from saying, “I want you to know, Will Graham, that it was *I* who influenced Hannibal to try and *eat you* .”

“So *close* ,” Will said, with a saucy tilt of his head.

“I hope you don’t mind me answering Will’s question, Bedelia.” Hannibal sipped his wine. When there was no response, he said, “I invited her. She found a way to join us here.”

“It wasn’t ‘us’ in your letter,” Bedelia said, her words soft and even with razor wire beneath them.

“Not a lie. Just an… *obfuscation* .” Will couldn’t help the petty pleasure of repeating Bedelia’s own words to her.

“Indeed,” Hannibal agreed, getting up to refill Bedelia’s wine glass. Will watched her with every muscle in his body coiled, ready to move if she tried anything else, even in her drugged state with no further weapons available.

“ *Contrapasso* ,” she said, lifting her glass and angling it a few degrees toward Will, a resolute motion, a tipping of the hat, a passing of the torch.

“You play, you pay.” Will copied her motion, and they both drank.

“Hannibal,” Bedelia said as she replaced her glass on the table. “Would it be rude of me to ask for a taste?” She nodded toward the roast of her leg.

Will felt an unconscious turn of his stomach at the thought, but it only lasted part of a second as he mentally veered away from Bedelia’s perspective and back toward Hannibal’s, so quickly it was nearly reflexive. Someday, he thought, it would be.

“Curious?” Hannibal exuded the radiant light of his pleasure at the idea. “Forgive me, I had no idea, or I would have served you when it was still hot.”

“You are forgiven,” Bedelia said. Her words hung in the air like the delicate candle smoke that rose toward the ceiling as the flames consumed the wicks and melted the wax, a steady, inevitable chemical change.

I can’t blame him for doing what evolution has equipped him to do.

Of course she forgave him. It was Will she despised.

Hannibal carved a piece of leg roast for Bedelia and set it on her plate, then cut it into smaller pieces. “You’ll excuse me if I don’t provide you with silverware.”

“Understandable.” Bedelia looked down at the plate, then at Hannibal, waiting until he reclaimed his seat. Then she used her fingers to lift a morsel of meat to her mouth. “Mmm,” she complimented, chewing with deliberate slowness.

“So much for not eating anything with a central nervous system,” Hannibal said to Will, who chuckled wryly.

“Delectable. As I knew it would be.” Bedelia looked like she might say something else, but decided against it. She picked up another piece of meat. Will watched, brows furrowed, as she seemed to fumble with it a minute before sticking it in her mouth. There was an audible crunching sound that shouldn’t have come from chewing the tender meat. Bedelia smiled at them after she’d swallowed. “I wish the two of you… all the happiness you *deserve* .” Bitter irony twisted through her words like thorny vines winding through porous brick, intent on destruction.

Will glanced at her hand where it rested on the table. It was shaking violently, but he was able to see that one of her long, demurely-painted fingernails was missing. He glanced at Hannibal, the question written on his face, but Hannibal was gazing across the table, through

the candlelight, at Bedelia, his features uncharacteristically emotive, eyes cold and angry, mouth pressed into a thin, furious line.

Bedelia gasped and choked. Will stood quickly, but Hannibal stopped him with a clipped pronunciation of his name. Bedelia's head tipped back on her chair, her face flushing a violent scarlet as she labored to draw air into her lungs. Will realized that in between her virulent attempts to breathe, she was laughing, a soft, mocking gurgle that chilled him to the end of every nerve.

She was dying.

As the realization dawned on Will, he went to Hannibal immediately and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Hannibal curved his arm back and rested his palm on top of the back of Will's hand as Will attempted to apply what he hoped was a reassuring pressure.

After a few long, agonizing minutes, her body gave one more violent twitch and she pitched forward, landing face-down on her plate before she slowly slid off the table, thudding to the floor with a sound of mortal finality and a whisper of beaded fabric. There she tremored off and on for another minute or two before going fatally still.

Hannibal lifted his glass to his lips, then slowly returned it to its place, the wine glowing golden in the candlelight. He turned to look up at Will, his features having rearranged again. The deep, excruciating anger was gone, replaced with a look of soft regret. He stroked the back of Will's scarred knuckles with his thumb, then released his hand. Will backed away a few steps as he stood up and crossed to kneel next to Bedelia's corpse, drawing her hair away from her face. Her eyes were bloodshot, staring, empty. Hannibal pressed the lids closed, then lifted her hand to examine the missing fingernail. There was a bit of natural nail left, ground down to almost nothing. The false nail had been glued in place, matching all the others perfectly, the details that might have given it away obscured by a coat of pale rose polish.

Hannibal got to his feet and blew out the candles on the table, leaving the room in shadows kept at bay by moonlight that found its way through the cracks in the curtains.

"Cyanide?" Will asked tentatively, closing the distance between them. Hannibal turned and took both of Will's hands in his own.

"The inside of the nail was hollow and filled with it, I imagine," Hannibal said with a regretful sigh. "The casing thin enough to bite through." Only his eyes hinted at his anger now, glittering fearsomely for a moment. "Bedelia did always like to have the last word."

Will tried a reassuring smile. "She did."

"Fate has a habit of not letting us choose our own endings. Bedelia was an exception, after a fashion. Admirable, really, but now the rest of the meat is unusable."

"That was part of it, too," Will said, glancing down at her crumpled body. "Her design." She looked whole and complete from this angle, the stump hidden beneath her gown.

“Undoubtedly. I’m sorry, Will, I didn’t account for her cleverness. All along, she had the capacity to be as unpredictable as you can.”

Will shook his head with a forgiving smile. “It’s okay. It was, uhm… pretty ingenious.” He glanced down at the body again. “Do you… need some help… cleaning up?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Will. What kind of host would I be?” Hannibal returned to his place at the table and sat. Will took his seat as well, and they finished dinner, with Bedelia Du Maurier growing steadily colder on the carpet nearby.

Hannibal did accept Will’s assistance with clearing the table and securing the leftovers. “I’d like to send some home for Luz, if you’re amenable,” he said later, in the mansion’s industrial-sized kitchen, as Will rinsed plates in the sink.

Will bristled momentarily at the thought, remembering how he’d felt when he realized Hannibal had been feeding his dogs human flesh all along in the form of sausages. And, as if that wasn’t enough, using the treats to win their trust and be sure they saw him as a friend, granting him unrestricted access to the home in Wolf Trap. It was, on a smaller scale, what he’d done to Will.

But now, he was asking permission, and that felt like it should mean something.

“Let me think about it?” He phrased the response as a question. “I, uh… she can’t decide for herself. And I doubt it would happen, but I wouldn’t want her to… get a taste for it. When a dog bites someone, tastes blood… there’s a reason they get put down.”

“Take all the time you need.” Hannibal placed the containers of leftovers in the refrigerator and wrapped the bones to store in the freezer.

“And, um…” Will began. Hannibal closed the freezer door and turned to him, brows raised. “Not the kid,” he requested, wincing, not sure how Hannibal would react. “And not Magdaly.”

“I’m in no mood to be cursed,” Hannibal said with a half-smile. “Though I’m not convinced she wouldn’t eat some even if she knew what it was. I told you the town chased her out for witchcraft. She told me it was because she used her powers to curse those that had wronged her. She’s been blamed for several deaths, including the father of her children.”

“But that’s not…” Will trailed off, wiping his hands on a towel. “D’you think she killed them, and then blamed it on something supernatural? Or…”

Hannibal only finished his smile. “Mothers can be killers,” he said. “Just as fathers can.”

Hannibal folded the dish cloth and hung it on the edge of the sink. “Would you accompany me on a walk along the beach, Will? I know it’s late, but as a result of the abrupt end to dinner I find myself reluctant to say goodnight.”

“Sure.” Will felt a warmth spread through his belly that was simultaneously pleasured anticipation and reminiscent of the feeling of blood gushing from his gut when Hannibal

opened him up all over the kitchen floor.

The clear sky now hosted a herd of low-lying clouds over the ocean, back-lit by the moon, the stars still visible directly overhead. At the end of the path that led from Will's house to the beach, they toed off their shoes. Will hadn't been wearing socks to begin with, and Hannibal left his folded neatly inside of his Italian leather footwear. Hannibal offered Will his hand as they neared the place where the waves broke, but Will curled his arm through Hannibal's instead, resting his hand on his bicep, which seemed to thoroughly please him, the expression evident even in the blue dark.

The waves filled in the silence, as did the rushing breeze. Will felt awkward and inarticulate, unable to even hint at what was filling his heart, not to mention his belly. He mentally excused himself for it and let his touch do the talking. After a time, Hannibal rested his other hand over Will's where it sat on Hannibal's upper arm, just above the crook of his elbow.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal said, his tone relaxed, sedate. "Have you enjoyed renewing your interest in entomology?"

"There's, ah, plenty of species here I haven't seen in person before," Will told him. "I've been reading about, um, the Indies short-tailed cricket. *Anurogryllus celerinictus* . People in the, ah, bug community think they were responsible for Havana syndrome – the sonic attacks at the American embassy. It's invasive – maybe came here in a hurricane from southern Florida or Jamaica." By the time they'd strolled up to the island's western point and turned around to head back, Will realized he'd been info-dumping for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. "That's, um, probably more than you wanted to know about crickets."

"The crickets are incidental," Hannibal said as the breeze ruffled up his carefully styled hair. "Your enthusiasm is not."

The simple declaration was so validating it made Will shiver, the tremor radiating out from his spine. It was uncanny, feeling so *seen* . Not only seen, but cherished.

"It's colder tonight than it has been." Hannibal stripped off his jacket in a few deft movements and held it up for Will to slide his arms into. "You left yours in my kitchen, I think."

"Yeah. Took it off to wash dishes, but, um, I'm f-fine."

Hannibal just stood there, smiling gently until Will turned and let him slide the jacket on for him and adjust the collar and lapels. Will was overcome with his nearness, his cologne on the jacket mixed with the night wind. There was no conscious thought, only the gravitational pull of the kiss.

Hannibal seemed to change his own mind at the last possible moment, turning to catch Will's lips under the knife-cut of his cheekbone instead. However, unable to acquiesce entirely, he pulled Will against him, one arm around the bow of his back, the other splayed flat between his shoulder blades. Will allowed a tiny rumble of frustration to issue in his throat, but found himself content to embrace in return. He rested his chin on Hannibal's shoulder, the side of his face burrowed into his neck, close enough to feel its heat and pulse, to be overcome by his

scent. His tongue screamed to glide across that very flesh, but he stayed in control, pressing it instead to the scar tissue inside his mouth. He sensed a change in Hannibal's breathing and the most delicate tremor in his touch. Hannibal turned and kissed Will's hairline, just the gentlest brush of his lips.

"Bedelia used to say that to touch others makes us who we are," Hannibal murmured into his ear.

"It builds trust," Will added, his words against Hannibal's shoulder, a blade-thin layer of fine cloth between his breath and the skin beneath.

"You understand, then?"

Will nodded yes against him.

At long last, Hannibal drew them apart. They walked home hand in hand in a silence that hung like a velvet stage curtain; heavy, layered, but rich in color and soft to the touch.

Season 4 Episode 3: Aché

Chapter Summary

Will receives a treasured gift from Hannibal. An encounter with a child dredges up memories of Abigail. Will learns what it means to GIVE a kiss.

Chapter Notes

Companion song: “Foundations (feat. Adara)” – MitiS

“Can't stop me now, can't stop me now
Keep spinning 'round, keep spinning 'round
We'll feel the ground, we'll feel the ground
Can't stop me now, can't stop me... now
Seems so long ago
So much we didn't know
Painting colors in the dark
Got up out the crowds
Our heads up in the clouds
Running mazes through our hearts
When all our dreams felt like concrete, we couldn't be shaken
Then all around the world crashed down and cracked the foundation
Clocks keep ticking, everyone's spinning
Life's a prize that we should be winning
Burn the forest, they cannot fix it
Kill their roots cause they just don't get it
Time keeps ticking on
Farther to go on
What we're made of
Staring at the glass, trying to get a grasp
But I keep falling out of reach
How did we get so lost?
The lines we didn't cross when we were running towards a dream
The earthquake came
All that remained was broken up concrete
Walked through the flame
It left its name in scars on our bodies
On a cliff we're scared to fall off
Trying to show the world what we're made of
On the edge and I just keep praying
We can build back up our foundation
Time keeps ticking on

Farther to go on
What we're made of

"Good morning, Will."

Will glanced up from his book, trying to look even mildly surprised. As if he didn't know the exact second Hannibal was going to get out of the water and walk back up to the house. He put the book down (noting that it had been right-side-up this time) and tried to move as casually as he could for the deck railing. "How's the water?" he asked.

"Warmer every day," Hannibal said, rubbing the towel on the back of his head, robe falling open, giving Will what he thought was a very deliberate view of his bare chest, which was sculpting up nicely from the extra swims. Will wondered if he'd been using the gym, too. Trying to look good for *him* . That thought set his pulse pounding, the day suddenly dazzlingly bright, his vision overwhelmed.

"Hmm?" Will asked. He realized Hannibal had said something, but the buzzing of blood in his ears had canceled it out.

"I said you should try it," Hannibal suggested.

"I learned to swim in a crick and a swimmin' hole," Will said, purposely emphasizing the drawling way his people used to talk down South. It brought an immediate smile to Hannibal's face. "Not a lot of, ah, current to speak of."

"I'll go with you," Hannibal offered, arranging the towel over his shoulders and using his fingers to comb his wet hair back and out of his way. "I saved you once, if you remember."

Will scoffed, a quick exhale through the nose accompanied moments later by a little grin. "I know." *Just don't blame me if I drown on purpose just to get a little mouth-to-mouth.*

A week and a half since Bedelia's last supper. They'd touched exactly twice, holding hands on a beach walk, and when Hannibal found Will hanging up his clothes in Magdaly's stead. That had earned Will something very special – Hannibal coming up behind him and encircling him, hands splayed on Will's chest, Hannibal's head resting on his shoulder and neck for a long, exquisite moment, audibly breathing in his scent.

"Did you just smell me?" Will had scolded gently as he'd pinned a sock to the line, pretending to be offended.

"Difficult to avoid." Hannibal had treated himself to another long inhale, before he'd released Will and stepped back. "The Gucci Mémoire d'une Odeur. Built around Roman chamomile, which ancient soldiers used in wartime for courage in battle. It blends *very* well with you."

Will had turned and put his arms around Hannibal's neck, unable to help himself. "That's me. Spoiling for a fight," he said softly, leaning in. *Please,* he'd thought.

It hadn't happened. Hannibal had stopped him by a gentle tug on the hair. "Will," he'd chastised, though it hadn't escaped Will's notice how he had lingered a moment longer than necessary in the embrace. When he broke away and went back inside the mansion, Will hadn't been able to stop his sigh of frustrated longing.

"Come up to the house in an hour," Hannibal now said as he continued along his way up from the beach. "We'll have a coffee."

"Sure," Will said, unabashedly watching Hannibal walk the rest of the way up to the mansion. Right before Hannibal reached the veranda, he glanced back, just enough to give a taste of his profile, catching Will's obvious ogling. Will just straightened his shoulders and kept looking, the memory of the laundry incident giving him added confidence.

An hour later, Will came up to the mansion's veranda with Luz at his heels. He walked slowly to make sure she could keep up – her belly was getting rounder by the day. Hannibal was waiting for him at the glass-topped table, the surface of which was arrayed with little dishes of fresh fruit, and a plate of square pastries Will didn't know the name of, as well as the promised café Cubano. Two cups waited for them, glistening at the top with sugar foam.

Hannibal stood when he approached and offered him the other seat. He'd changed out of the swimwear, unfortunately, but was looking as sharp as usual in a tan linen blazer with a dark blue shirt beneath, open at the neck. "Good morning again," he greeted, a hand on the back of Will's chair to help him guide it a bit closer to the table. "And good morning to you," he said to the dog as he settled back into his seat. Luz responded by flopping down onto the cool tiles of the veranda at Will's feet, giving them a full view of her round figure.

Will lifted the little espresso cup to his lips and took a small sip, anticipating the beverage's temperature. "I don't know how you do that. I can't ever get the foam part right. Just when I think I got it figured out, I forget what I did the last time that made it work."

"We'll have to have a lesson." Hannibal lifted a petite china plate and arranged some fruits and a couple of the pastry squares on it, then handed it across the table to Will before serving himself. "Part of your struggle, I think, is patience. That applies in a number of ways in life, but now, here, it vexes you in one other way in particular."

Will let out a harsh laugh that was quiet but startled. "Oh? What way is that?"

"Physical intimacy," Hannibal said with nearly medical plainness.

Will almost inhaled the mouthful of coffee he was currently drinking, but managed to swallow it without doing anything embarrassing with it. "...right," was all he could think to say.

"Touch creates trust. But touch also requires trust. While I would never want to change what happened the first night we met, now, in this time together, in the wake of it all, our trust in one another must be cultivated with the utmost care."

"I know," Will said softly, picking up a fork and moving the pieces of fruit around on his plate, just to give his hand something to do and his eyes somewhere else to be.

“You’ve spent much of your life starved for touch.” Hannibal speared a piece of *guayaba* and ate it, giving his words time to hang in the air. “From childhood, I imagine. Denied to you then, and later a side effect of your disconnect with others. College girlfriends aside.”

Will drained his espresso cup. “This is sounding suspiciously like, uhm… *therapy* , Dr. Lecter.”

“Conclusions drawn as a result of our former relationship as therapist and patient, yes.” Hannibal folded his hands on his crossed leg and watched Will eat a pastry square. “I’m repeating them now so that you understand that *I* understand how difficult this is for you.”

“Huh.” Will picked up another pastry. “These are good, what are they?”

“Will.” A hint of warning in the voice.

“I get it,” Will said, trying to reassure Hannibal of the fact, but sounding curt and clipped nevertheless. He sighed. “I know it’s the right thing to do. To touch others makes us who we are. We need to… rebuild who we are as… us.”

“Well said.” Hannibal drained his cup as well, his enjoyment of the coffee and sugar foam evident on his face as he closed his eyes to savor it. When he opened them, he said, “ *Pastelitos de guayaba y queso* . Puff pastry with guava paste and cream cheese.”

“Make these again,” Will ordered with playful force, trying to ease the tension. This earned him a little smile.

“Of course.”

They both watched Luz as she got up to furiously lick her leg for a moment, then circled the cool tiles of the veranda floor several times before flopping down again. “How much longer?” Hannibal inquired.

“I can’t be sure on an exact date,” Will said, “but I would guess three or four more weeks.”

“The gift of life,” Hannibal mused, almost to himself. “It is given at birth, but can be bestowed again later in life through circumstantial or symbolic rebirth.”

“Or CPR,” Will said, half through a mouthful of fruit.

“Or CPR,” Hannibal relented with a wider smile this time. “In that case, I have another gift for you, Will.” He lifted an 8-by-11 envelope from the empty chair next to him and handed it across the table to Will. It was made of thick, high quality maroon cardstock, with an embossed picture of a tied ribbon at the corner, offset in gold. Will flipped it over and opened it. Inside was a stack of papers and a few glossy photographs.

He examined the photos first. They appeared to be surveillance shots. Will immediately recognized Peter Bernadone by his distinctive head scar and haircut. In the first shot, he was walking three dogs down a wooded path — a chocolate lab, a Husky, and a pit bull mix, though tan in color, not black and white like Bandit had been. There was a woman at his side with a French bulldog on a leash and a chihuahua tucked under one arm. She had a bandanna

around her head, short braids trapped beneath and above. Peter's companion was clearly talking, an expressive hand in the air, and Peter was smiling, wide and full, shoulders relaxed and easy. In the next photo, taken through a chain link fence, Peter was sitting on a stool with a horse's hoof bent up in his hand, examining its underside. Another photo looked more like it had come from social media: Peter and the woman taking a selfie in front of a house. The woman had a conure on her shoulder.

Will rifled through the rest of the paperwork. There were copies of records showing that Peter had finished his three years in the same psychiatric facility where Abigail had been living, and moved into a halfway house for another year. Now his listed address was a home in Vermont. The house number matched the one in the picture with the woman and the bird. There was also a newspaper article from a small-town publication. It described a new animal shelter and sanctuary run by a Roxy Francis, veterinarian. Peter was in the promotional photograph as well, holding a rabbit in his arms like a baby, humble face bright with a tender smile.

"I thought he was gonna go to prison." Will's chest was tight with sudden, Marianas-deep gratitude. "They were housing him in the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility until trial. Figured he'd take a plea and do a few years for attempted murder…?"

"His alleged victim was a serial killer," Hannibal said, studying Will to gauge his reaction.

"I know, but — he couldn't have had the money for anything more than a public defender…"

"He had an entire team of lawyers." Hannibal puffed up, just the slightest bit, a pleased smile playing on his lips. "A new social worker and disability advocate as well. He was given three years at Port Haven, then released with transition support. Now he lives independently and will only be on probation for another year. He has the best in medical care and is financially stable. Peter works at the animal sanctuary mentioned in the article and resides with the owner."

"You did this." Will felt like crying, but he laughed gently through it. "It was you, wasn't it? All this time, since, ah, since the horse case?"

"I made the arrangements. Set things into motion." Hannibal spoke humbly, but Will could easily tell by the light in his eyes how pleased he was with himself. Not for doing a good and just thing, but for granting Will a gift he could treasure, something to ease his burdens. "Peter Bernadone gave us a beautiful moment, if you remember."

With all my knowledge and intrusion... I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but... what hatches, follows its own nature and is beyond me.

Will could feel the shadow of Hannibal's touch on his face as if the gesture had just happened, the lingering connection of Hannibal's fingers over his as they prevented him from firing the gun.

"I wouldn't… I would never… *not remember*," Will said, swallowing hard and chasing a tear with his thumb. "I want to, uhm…" He pushed back his chair.

Hannibal read his intention and they stood to embrace. Hannibal put his hand on the back of Will's neck, thumb finding its way into his hair, stroking gently. Will pressed in tightly, face in Hannibal's shoulder, breathing him in, wrapped in his arms, steady and warm and dangerously familiar. Will's grateful hands went from merely resting on Hannibal's back to moving over him in an entirely different way, grasping at the fabric of his jacket, one sliding lower as if of its own volition, headed for forbidden territory.

He realized what instinct was driving him to do and pulled back just as Hannibal did. Regardless of self-control on both sides, Hannibal seemed unable to stop himself. He pressed the pad of his his thumb against Will's bottom lip as he drew his hand along Will's jawline in a brief but significant caress that felt burdened, despite its delicate pressure.

"Will."
"I know," Will said crossly, stepping out of reach. Luz's head poked up from where she was laying, ears curved their direction, brows furrowed.

"What you're experiencing is the sense memory of our previous affair," Hannibal told him. "I want you to feel authentic desire."

Will wouldn't look at him, choosing instead to put his hands in his pockets and examine the clouds crawling across the horizon over the water. "I don't care," he said. Blunt, simple, true.

"I care on your behalf. Will, I need you to know–"

Hannibal silenced himself abruptly, and tilted his head a few degrees to the left.

"Know what? What do I need to know?" Will's hands were angry fists in his pockets.

"Listen," Hannibal commanded instead.

Just over the constant rush of the waves, Will could hear a child crying. It didn't sound like a baby, so it must be Alejandra.

Without speaking, they walked quickly down the path past Will's house, toward the Easter-colored cottage. "Alejandra?" Will called, repeating her name several times. There was no answer, but the cries grew louder the closer they got to the beach. "Where's Magdaly and the baby?"

"Went into town for a few things, I believe," Hannibal said as they neared the cottage door. It was open slightly, and no one answered when Will called out. Alejandra was used to staying by herself for short periods of time, and often played in front of the cottage or in the garden, petting Luz or asking Will a long series of questions if he was out on the back deck. "I think she's further down the beach, Will."

They found the girl at the base of a dune, her wailing now settled into sniffles and moans. She was clutching her foot, and her hands were bloody.

" *¿Qué sucedió?* " Will demanded as he knelt down next to her.

“ *Me corté el pie.* ” She pointed to a jagged piece of thick plastic, some kind of trash that must have washed up on shore during the high tide. Usually the sand was soft and safe with only seashells to worry about. Alejandra preferred to only wear shoes to school.

“Bring her back to your house, Will,” Hannibal said, “and I’ll meet you there.” He set off back toward the house, probably for his doctor’s kit.

“*¿ Puedes caminar?* ”

The child slowly unwrapped her hands from her foot. There was a long gash along the arch. Alejandra bravely tried a step or two, but Will stopped her. “I should help you. Can I help you?”

She nodded, swiping at her nose with her forearm. Will picked her up gingerly and she shifted in his grip until she was clinging to him with her arms around his neck and her long, faun-like legs wrapped around his hips, feet crossed. He shook his head and made a face that was half smile and half grimace when she wiped her face on his shirt.

Hannibal was waiting for them on Will’s back veranda, ready with his bag and a bowl of warm water and clean cloths. He sat in one chair and Will settled across from him with Alejandra on his knees, her foot extended into Hannibal’s hands. Luz trundled out of the shade of a tree to investigate and immediately came to offer her brand of help, which was to sit right by Will’s chair and lick the girl’s hand, nosing up under her palm in a clear gesture of concern.

The girl winced and sucked in breath as Hannibal cleaned the wound, but otherwise remained stoic, though she gripped Will’s arm where he had it slung around her waist to steady her.

When Hannibal was finished washing and dressing the wound, he said, “Well done. You were very brave. Your mother will be back shortly - shall I take you home?”

Alejandra responded by leaning back against Will and pulling her feet up, resting them on the arm of the chair as her wound would allow. “No, Doctor.” Her tone was controlled and frighteningly adult, decisive, in no way weepy or petulant or overwrought. “Thank you, Doctor,” she added.

Hannibal glanced at Will as he stood. Will had seen that expression before. He was thinking of Abigail. It was so evident on his face it brought a rush of grief boiling to the surface of Will’s mind. Hannibal turned without another word and went back inside the mansion, bag at his side.

Alejandra sighed and rested her head against Will’s chest for a minute or two. They just sat quietly in the chair, the child’s spindly limbs curled up, perched in Will’s lap like she belonged there. He stared down at her dark curls for a moment before turning his attention back to Luz. “She’s okay, girl.”

Luz didn’t take his word for it. She put her paws on Will’s knee and forced herself up so she could sniff and lick Alejandra’s face until she smiled and laughed. “All right, that’s enough. See, she’s fine,” Will scolded, shooing the dog away.

“How do you go to school to be a doctor in the USA?” Alejandra asked, her voice watery but steadily stronger with each word.

Will scoffed gently. “You must be feeling better if you’re ready to, uh, ask some more questions.”

“ *¿Cuándo vendrán los cachorros?* ”

“A few more weeks. We don’t know exactly how long ago she got pregnant.”

“How did she get pregnant?” Alejandra slid off of Will’s lap, using one foot only, and kneeling at the dog’s side to feel her stomach.

“ *Hazle esa pregunta a tu madre.* ” Let Magdaly field this one. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Do you have any Fanta?” The girl’s dark eyes were hopeful.

Will shook his head with a little smile. “No. How about juice?”

“Okay.” She stretched out on the tile next to Luz, cradling her head on her bent arm, and petted her with long, soothing strokes, Luz’s tail thumping in a gentle rhythm.

After awhile, Will heard Magdaly calling for Alejandra from down by the cottage. “Mama’s home,” he said.

She got up, only resting the toes of her injured foot on the ground, then extended her arms expectantly. Will knelt down and encouraged her to climb on his back instead. It felt less… fatherly. Alejandra piggybacked home after being told not to hold on so tight to Will’s neck so she didn’t choke him. He couldn’t see her face, but he could easily hear her giggling when she did it again on purpose.

“Tell El Doctor thank you,” Magdaly said when he dropped Alejandra off. Then, “ *Gracias* .” This she directed at Will before going into her house and shutting the door. There was appreciation, surely, but also a wariness as she’d lifted Alejandra into her own arms. Considering what had happened to the last family that had let Will stand in as a father, she was well within her rights to be wary as hell. If only Molly had been more vigilant, less willing to want to fix something broken.

Now, do you understand that I don’t see you as broken?

Kintsugi. Gold in the broken places.

Molly had met him at an excruciatingly vulnerable time in his life. And she’d been vulnerable, too, since losing Austin. It was reasonable that she was willing to overlook Will’s past to try and piece together some sort of family unit. Never mind that the missing piece needed some repairs; there was enough good there that it was worth saving. She had thought him worthy of the time and effort. It made his heart hurt thinking about it now.

Despite his gratitude for being perceived as repairable, he wondered, thinking of the instinctive warning that flashed across Magdaly's dark eyes, didn't Molly have a similar inborn drive to protect Walter? If so, in the end, why had she even considered welcoming Will into her family, knowing what he'd done for a living, knowing the people he knew and the situations he'd found himself in? Even if she'd seen his potential value, and how honored and tender that made Will feel, Walter should have been her first priority, shouldn't he? He'd already lost his real father — wasn't that enough trauma for one kid? How naïve she'd been, asking him to marry her. Ought to have had better sense, or have smelled disaster on him as strongly as Hannibal could scent and detest his former aftershave.

Once the thought had crossed his mind and coalesced into something fully formed, he hated himself for thinking it. It wasn't Molly's fault, through some kind of mental gymnastics, that she and Walter had almost been changed by the Great Red Dragon. Only Will had truly known, deep inside, that he was not husband and father material. Still, he'd accepted the proposal, knowing full well that Hannibal would always be a part of him. He knew Hannibal had agency outside the Baltimore State Hospital. Will knew he was marked and always would be. He was the one who didn't tell Molly everything she needed to know to make an informed decision.

He had never confessed to Molly that he and Hannibal had been sleeping together all along. Never hinted at anything more than a vague attraction, a meeting of the minds, like two chess players no one else could match. He'd been forthcoming about the terrifying mental connection they'd had, the psychological manipulations, but to this day, she didn't know. Might have her suspicions, like Freddie Lounds, but nothing solid. The only people who knew for sure were Hannibal and himself. Bev had likely guessed, and Julien — Bedelia, most likely, as Hannibal's therapist. That would explain the particularly baleful stares she'd given him at her last supper.

He never asked Hannibal if he'd been sleeping with Bedelia in Florence, but based on her insistence that she deserved to be Hannibal's partner behind his bloody veil, it was probable.

Jealous. Will sighed out the tension in his shoulders and walked back up to his house. He could hear music coming from the mansion, Faint strains of intermittent melody, and just see the top of Hannibal's head as he sat at the piano bench, just beyond the fluttering curtains.

Will checked on Luz, then combed his hair with his fingers, and dabbed a drop of Alejandra's blood from the base of his thumb. He let his feet crunch on the shell and gravel walkway that led up to the big house, announcing his presence.

Despite his noisy approach and lack of any attempt to muffle his footsteps on the echoey marble floors of the foyer, Hannibal did not look up from his sheet music when Will entered the room and came to stand next to him at the piano bench. The top of the piano was littered with crumpled up sheets of handwritten music, partially filled only to be discarded. Will had never known Hannibal to do anything like this, save the day he rained notebooks and papers down from the balcony of his office in what seemed like happy anticipation of Jack's last supper and their upcoming escape.

Hannibal scented him and turned briefly on the bench, giving only his profile and no eye contact. "Hello, Will."

“I hope I’m, uh, not interrupting…?”

“You are. But I would welcome it.” Still, Hannibal faced the keys and the blank page in front of him. Will sat on the bench with him and watched Hannibal try our a few minor chords that seemed hesitant, sweetly sad. “Is the child with her mother?”

“Yeah.”

Hannibal tried another chord, tilting his head to listen.

Will felt the stirrings of the ambient pulse in his head as he studied Hannibal’s expression, sensing turbulent undercurrents masked by his placid features. “This is a song,” he said, lifting one of the wadded up pieces of paper from the top of the piano, “about Abigail.”

Hannibal pressed another cord. To Will it sounded slightly askew, like the notes didn’t know what to do with themselves, so laden with tears and fury.

I’m metabolizing the experience by composing a new piece of music.

Apparently, Abigail’s loss was still indigestible.

“Tell me, Will,” Hannibal said evenly, as if Will couldn't perceive the tumult within him. “What was it like, being a father?”

“To Walter?”

“Was that his name?”

Will felt a sharp, bitter pinch in his heart that might have been anger, might have been regret. “Yeah.”

“What was it like to be a father to Walter?” He pressed the keys again, softly, trying another cord. Lifting his pencil, he made a mark on the music sheet.

Will searched for the word. “It felt like a… formality.”

Hannibal’s eyebrow twitched in interest, but he kept his eyes on his work and pressed another series of notes.

“How much, uhm… d-do you know? About them?”

“Assume I know nothing,” Hannibal requested.

“Molly was a widow. I, uh… I wasn’t Walter’s father. I wasn’t trying to be. I wouldn’t… presume to replace Austin.” He sighed softly, trying to gather his words. They kept falling out of his hands like marbles. “He’s a good kid. He wasn’t, um, trouble.”

“But you certainly were.”

Will moistened his lower lip. “Yeah. Yeah, I was, wasn’t I?”

Hannibal played a long progression, reading from the beginning of his page, then took the paper in his hands and crumpled it, not angrily, but compulsively.

“He respected that I wasn’t trying to be his father. He did me the-the courtesy of calling me ‘dad’ when Molly was in earshot. His entire… allegiance… is to her. As it should be.”

“He was wary of you from the beginning.” Hannibal stated it as an indisputable fact. “Wanting to protect his mother.”

“Can’t blame him. Not for a second.”

Hannibal helped himself to a new piece of blank musical score from a stack on a small table near the piano. Will had never read music before, and watched, transfixed, as Hannibal sketched in numbers and symbols that were unfamiliar to him before writing a single note. “I was on my honor,” Hannibal said, “to look after Abigail. Just as I was on my honor to look after Mischa.” He raised the pencil, then set it deliberately on the edge of the music stand above the keys. “I failed both of them.”
Will didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything. Together, they stared at the blank sheet, at the maddeningly empty horizontal lines.

“I have fear in my heart, Will.” At last, Hannibal spoke, and turned to look at him, a lock of hair falling over his forehead, the hand closest to Will still resting lightly on the piano keys. “I am on my honor to look after you. I don’t like your odds.”

“On your honor?” Will actively shoved down the desire to brush that errant strand of hair back behind Hannibal’s ear. “Who did you promise?”

“Initially, Alana Bloom,” Hannibal said, turning back to the keys and running through another section of music Will hadn’t heard before. “And then, myself. I like to think that I always keep my promises, Will, but when faced with your betrayal four years ago I found myself unable to fulfill what honor required of me.”

“Abigail lived with you in secret for… months,” Will said, each word spoken aloud bringing a more concrete understanding of a facet of Hannibal’s life he hadn’t allowed himself to consider for a long time. “You knew her better than I did.”

“I made her for you, Will.” A tear snuck out of Hannibal’s eye. He was quick to brush it off and return to his song, though the notes soon faltered. “But in the process, she became something more.”

“Something more to you.”

Hannibal nodded. “I meant it when I said that we were her fathers. I wanted her to see that as well. I dug up Garret Jacob Hobbs and presented Abigail with his remains.” Will tamed his visceral reaction before it erupted into the moment. “I wanted her to see what was left of him. That she could decide to be free of him. I wanted to give Abigail her power back, a way to combat the psychological trauma.She slit his throat with a knife he made. Barely hesitated.”

“Atta girl,” Will murmured with a bereft little smile.

“I couldn’t protect her in her previous life. So I gave her another one. We killed her in the family kitchen. A blood ritual. She died symbolically and was reborn, just as you and I were when we came out of the ocean, Will.”

Will swallowed back the hard lump in his throat and tried to breathe and listen.

“She would have accepted us just as she accepted her father.” Hannibal leaned forward and drew a series of notes on the page. “Just as we accepted her, knowing what she’d done.”

Will saw his lip quiver, and quickly looked away. “But in that moment, when I walked into the kitchen,” he managed, voice thick with emotion, “you didn’t see her. You saw a way to hurt me… the way I hurt *you* .”

“My love for her, and her making, was meaningless without you.” Hannibal’s voice had evened out again, and he pressed down another chord.

Will nodded, sealing his lips together. Hannibal pulled the new sheet music down from its place on the stand and examined it, then moved to crumple it up. Will caught his hand; the places where their skin touched felt like frost and fire. “Show me some of it,” he requested, voice mirroring the gentle touch. “How to play it.”

For a second, he thought Hannibal might refuse. But then he placed his right hand over Will’s, and circled his left arm around to rest on Will’s hip. The contact between their bodies felt like a sacred joining, the body of Christ dissolving against a tongue. Hannibal positioned Will’s hand, splaying the fingers and thumb, to catch several keys, then applied a delicate pressure. The chord rang out through the quiet room, the vibrations of sound losing themselves in the distant crash of the ocean.

Somehow in the simple speech of the piano, Will received the message.

A child together was a hope best abandoned.

Hannibal shifted Will’s hand and pressed again, and once more. By the time the notes evaporated into the aether, Hannibal’s left hand had crept up, fingers bent to run the edge of his knuckles over the line of Will’s jaw, tracing down beneath his chin, and now back below his ear and down the slope of his neck. The caress was simple, almost automatic, but Will felt the rounded edge of every finger, every elongated second of that touch.

“I once told Abigail, ‘even if you know the state of who you are today, you can’t predict who you’ll be tomorrow. You’re defined up until now, not beyond’.”

“Hmm,” Will said, unable to formulate an answer with Hannibal’s hand in his hair now. They each shifted to meet one another’s gaze. Hannibal permitted Will to put his hand on his thigh, in exchange for winding Will’s hair behind his ear.

“Yet,” Hannibal said, “though it is, perhaps, misguided, I feel defined by who I’ll be tomorrow.”

“Who will you be tomorrow?” Will asked, a gentle half-whisper, the cadence of smoke.

“Someone who loves you.”

Will *gave* Hannibal a kiss.

As it was happening, their lips together, mouths open only the tiniest bit, Will realized the difference, the newness of this particular endearment. It was not a demand, not a clutch, not a seduction, not a meal, not a threat.

Will only let himself turn his head an inch or two, and made his hand stay put on Hannibal’s leg. Hannibal clutched his other, resting it against his own heart. Once. Twice. They pulled back simultaneously to look at one another. Hannibal’s eyes were alight with something that struck Will as dangerous, but when he blinked, the edge went away, leaving soft amber in its wake.

Another kiss, freely given by Hannibal, and warmly and honestly received by Will. It was deeply tempting to fall into sensation completely, the way he used to when trying to remain in the present moment and not collapse into a waking nightmare, when his brain was on fire and reality was falling away, paint peeling from the walls of the universe. Hannibal had taught him how to use his senses to ground himself and be present, but that had led only to using sex as a way to define existence and glut himself on touch. The taste of Hannibal’s mouth was uncannily familiar, like *déjà vu* – something that often precedes a seizure. He didn’t remember Hannibal inducing seizures, at least not with any linear clarity, but was it possible to have *déjà vu* of *déjà vu* ?

It didn’t feel like a misfiring of the brain. It felt like a miracle. Then again, it had felt like a miracle to St. Vitus.

Hannibal broke away as Will teetered on the brink of giving over to pure sensation. “I feel,” he said, winding his fingers through Will’s hair, stroking his cheek with his thumb, “I should remind both of us of our previous conversation before Alejandra needed our help.”

“Right.” Will moved to pull back, to sever the connection entirely. Hannibal’s fingers closed around the wrist that still rested on his leg and stopped him there, and with a handful of hair. The tiny taste of that intimate pain brought a hot flush to every inch of Will’s skin. His breath caught, and he closed his eyes, leaning into what he thought would be another kiss.

Hannibal tilted forward, but stopped when their lips were a knife’s blade apart. “I wanted to tell you,” he breathed, “that denying myself your physical love has been a Herculean effort. What you suffer, I suffer, Will. But we both have to understand it is unwise to build on hasty foundations. We’ve tried it before, and the house fell. And we fell with it.”

Will made a wordless sound of assent. Hannibal released him and turned back to the piano, caressing the keys but not playing them. “This particular piece may never come to me.”

Will shrugged.”I mean… what if, uhm… we worked on it together? I don’t know… any of this, but…”

“That might be just the thing.” Hannibal didn’t smile, but the raw ingredients of one were gathered in his voice. He took Will’s hand again, slung his other arm around his waist, and

together they pressed the keys.

Season 4 Episode 4: Oricha

Chapter Summary

Hannibal brings Will to a party with Havana's elite as his *plus one*!! Will meets someone he would really like to kill.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: "Havana" – Camila Cabello

"Oh, but my heart is in Havana
There's somethin' 'bout his manners
Havana…"

Will made a frustrated sound in his throat as he discovered more dog hair on his slacks. How did it keep showing up? This was the third time since getting dressed he'd scraped it off. He put his foot up on a kitchen chair and brushed hopelessly at the pant leg. For some reason, this particular pair of linen pants, the usual khaki with a matching jacket, were dog hair magnets. Luz's darker brown hairs refused to give up their colonized land on his calf. Luckily, the dark blue shirt he wore under the jacket was made of some other material that didn't seem to suffer the same problem.

Will swore under his breath. "Thanks a lot," he said over his shoulder to Luz, who was stretched out on the tile. This only resulted in her getting up and coming right to him, thwacking her tail against this other leg, and leaving more hair behind. "Oh hell," Will groaned. "Shoo, go lay down!"

There was a soft knock at the front door. Will's heart flipped forward and back again and he stopped for a breath before going to answer.

Hannibal was at the door as expected, exactly on time, down to the minute. In one arm he cradled a large vase of freshly cut flowers, birds of paradise and orchids surrounded by lush greenery, the blooms ranging from yellow to orange to fiery red. In his other hand was a covered plate. He was particularly dressed up this evening in navy trousers and a seersucker jacket with tiny blue and white pinstripes. All this was pulled together by a gently patterned navy, white, and gold tie, and a pocket square that matched the tones but was just different enough not to be derivative.

"Good evening, Will."

“H-hey.” Will looked at the intimidatingly large bouquet and felt warmth rise up his neck and stretch its fingers over his face. One of the blossoms touched Hannibal’s cheek with one inch of petal, and the sight of it was all it took to send Will’s imagination into overdrive.

Hannibal waited a beat while Will was still struggling to take in the whole of the scene. “May I come in?”

“Yes, sure, of course.” *Goddamn it.* He stepped back awkwardly and let Hannibal into the cabana house. “Luz, outside.”

She yawned and took her sweet time getting to her feet and waddling out to the veranda. In the interim, Hannibal set down the plate on the kitchen counter and arranged the flowers on the small table after filling the vase with water from the tap.

“That- those are, uhm…” What the hell was wrong with him that he couldn’t form words? Was he about to have a seizure? “Pretty,” he finished.

Hannibal unwrapped the plate to let him see what was on it. “ *Pastelitos de guayaba y queso* ,” he said, “As requested.”

“Thank you.” Getting baked goods he’d asked for was less awkward than getting flowers, probably for insipid gender-related reasons.

“Also.” Hannibal lifted a lint roller out of his pocket and handed it to Will. “I thought you might be in need.”

Will laughed. It sounded nervous but appreciative. He lifted his foot to the chair again and ran the sticky roller over his cuffs. “She’s got short hair everywhere else,” he said, “but that damn tail.”

Hannibal looked at his watch. “Shall we?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Will abandoned the lint roller on the bathroom sink, and they left the cabana house, heading not for the beach but the long wooden dock. There was a red and white ‘80s-era bowrider waiting for them, piloted by an older man Will had never seen before. The stranger wore linen pants and a red guayabera with white stitching that matched the upholstery of the boat.

“Good evening, Diego,” Hannibal greeted. The man lifted his hat with a smile and a nod and fired up the boat. Hannibal offered Will his hand to climb on.

When they’d settled on the cushioned seats in the front of the boat, Will leaned closer to say, “I think that shoulda been me, uh, helping *you* . I’ve climbed aboard a boat or two.”

This earned him a soft chuckle from Hannibal that was lost in the rumbling of the motor as the boatman took them out to sea, then turned parallel to the shoreline. The early evening sun was still strong and golden, gleaming on the surface of the water like the scales of a great leviathan. The water was calm, but the motor made it difficult to have much of a conversation. Hannibal settled for resting his arm on the back of the seat so it crossed behind

Will's shoulders, and Will leaned back comfortably, soothed by the action and the familiar feeling of being a boat. They weren't touching, but their proximity felt intimate.

The ride lasted a little over half an hour, taking them from the tiny island toward the urbanized shoreline of Havana, then away from it again. The dock where they eventually landed also housed a sizable yacht. Diego secured the lines and this time, Hannibal let Will help him onto the dock.

Will caught Diego before he could get back on the boat. " *Hay algo mal con tu…* " Will didn't know the word. "Propeller." He made a little spinning motion with his hand. Diego wrinkled his brow, the gleam of questions in his small, dark eyes. "Uh, *las vibraciones* . You have a chip in one of your blades, or there's, ah, some fishing line in it, maybe."

" *¿De verdad?* I will check, thank you." Diego thumbed up his hat again, and climbed back aboard, presumably to wait, as Hannibal had likely hired him to do.

When Will turned back to Hannibal, he caught him smiling, eyes soft and loving. "Maybe he'll hire you to fix it for him."

Will scoffed, but gently. "Maybe. I could. Depending on what the problem is. Might need parts."

The dock led to a pristine path lined with palm trees, their trunks wrapped in miles of white Christmas lights. The path took them up a small rise that revealed more and more of an enormous house with each step they took. The neoclassical monstrosity was cream-colored, with an overuse of gold leaf accents and black wrought iron, skirted by meticulously maintained gardens full of classical statues and a decorative pond. The tall arched windows of the first floor were busy with lights and movement, and Will could hear what sounded like live big-band-style music traveling on the breeze, alternating between Glenn Miller and jazz fare.

"Thank you for coming with me," Hannibal said as they approached the grand columned entrance. "I find my patient to be frustrating enough. As of recently, his wife is trying to have an affair with me."

"What?" Will's exclamation was sharp and barked, like a dog with a stepped-on tail.

"If I had to guess, she's planning to seduce me, then ask me to kill her husband in a way that seems related to his ongoing heart condition."

Will had to smile. The way Hannibal said the grimmest things so matter-of-factly, in a cadence so mild and ordinary, was never *not interesting* , to say the least. "That's very, ah… *Double Indemnity* of her." Another old movie he'd stayed up late to watch as a kid on public access TV.

"A *femme fatale* , to be sure."

Jealousy crept up Will's throat, making his words more like shards. "You gonna take her up on it?"

Hannibal slipped his hand into Will's with an amused smile. "I brought you with me to thwart her attempts, Will."

"Isn't it kinda risky for us to… go places together?" This was WIll's first trip off of the island since he'd awakened. He assumed they were in hiding, Hannibal only visiting patients in Havana in exchange for their assistance and influence with the country's bureaucrats. People might not recognize them individually, but there had to be press and law enforcement photos of the two of them together.

"There is risk, certainly. However, I've weighed that against the risk of becoming mired in a murder plot against one of our patrons."

"Even if you're curious to see what happens?" Will couldn't keep the sourness from his words, though he'd tried to say them gently. "Even if it's… therapeutic for her to kill him?"

"Even then." Hannibal took WIll's arm and looped it through his, resting Will's hand in the crook of his elbow and folding his own over it in a gesture that one hoped would not be misread; they were together. "By the way, your name is Christopher."

Will laughed, loud and genuinely rich. "I'll try to remember that. And who are you? Or should I just call you, um, sugar, or darlin', or-or, uh… *babe* ?"

He watched Hannibal half-stifle a similar laugh. "Whatever suits you. They know me as Dr. Boris Jakov."

"Then I should be Natasha," Will argued, with complete seriousness. Hannibal glanced at him, a question marked on his brows. " *Rocky and Bullwin…* ? Y'know what, never mind."

"Your alias refers to St. Christopher, patron of travelers. Many modern Catholics ignore or have forgotten that he was a monster."

"Head of a dog, body of a man? Yeah, I didn't learn about that in Sunday School," Will said. There were two men in black suits stationed at the door, one with a clipboard. One looked dour, hands crossed in front of him, the bulge of a gun evident beneath his suit jacket. The other was similarly outfitted, but was greeting guests with a courteous smile.

"St. Roch would have been more appropriate. Patron saint of dogs and those falsely accused of crimes."

"Shit, yeah, that's accurate."

"I didn't see you as a Rocco," Hannibal explained, lowering his voice as they approached the men guarding the door.

"Can't imagine why not," Will murmured, turning his head to snake the words into Hannibal's ear. "So am I a Chris, or a Topher?"

Hannibal didn't have time to answer before they stopped before the man with the clipboard. " *Buenas noches, Doctor Jakov."*

“ Hello, Juan, how’s your wife?” Hannibal asked pleasantly as Juan looked at the list on his clipboard.

“She’s doing better now, thanks. I showed her that stretch for her neck and she’s been doing it, like, every morning.” Juan’s dark eyes flicked up to meet Will’s. “This is your…”

“Plus one,” Hannibal said, like it was the easiest, most obvious thing in the world. Will felt his heart swell. And a little bit of something else, too. It felt significant, meaningful, just like going to the opera. God, that night seemed like a million fucking years ago. “Christopher Roque.”

“Welcome, guys. Everybody’s in the hall and the west salon. Enjoy.”

Hannibal thanked him and they entered beneath the arches and pillars, through the wide-open wooden doors. The hall was all marble, like Hannibal’s, but far more ostentatious. A white marble staircase wound behind Gothic arches, its banister made of intricately curved wrought iron with hammered gold accents. The floor was marble as well, black and white, a dangerously large crystal chandelier suspended high overhead. The space was decorated with fine things, yes – paintings, sculptures, suits of armor – but there was something disjointed about it. Will felt like he was looking at an oversized stall in the world’s most expensive flea market.

“Money doesn’t buy taste,” he said softly into Hannibal’s ear, just above a whisper.

Hannibal’s mouth quirked up and he squeezed Will’s hand against the inside of his elbow. “Behave yourself, Will.”

“Or what?”

Hannibal didn’t have time to answer. They were swept into a pristinely-dressed crowd of people and caterers with trays, the brass of the band on the second floor balcony forcing everyone to chatter loudly over it. Within moments, people were introducing themselves, drawing them into conversation, the languages switching quickly between Spanish, English, French, Italian. Will suffered through a barrage of pleasantries, sticking close to Hannibal, eating hors d'oeuvres when he did, keeping up with his light drinking instead of snagging anything alcoholic in sight to make this whole situation more bearable.

Many of the guests were international visitors of a certain level of wealth, and others were Cuban government officials or high-ranking military. Some of them Hannibal seemed to have met before, perhaps while here treating his patient.

Speaking of. “Our host,” Hannibal said in an aside, indicating a white man in a tuxedo, a little taller than each of them, with silver hair and a pale mustache cut to pristine angles. He descended the stairs from the second floor with a tall, catlike woman on his arm. “Richard Lesko. American. Made his fortune through aggressively hostile expansions and debt-financed takeovers of other businesses. Then he robbed these companies of their money and parked the funds, along with those from investors, in dummy corporations. When it all inevitably crumbled, he took the money and ran.”

“And that’s the *femme fatale* ?” Will’s envy gnawed at him, despite the reassuringly possessive hand Hannibal had parked on his lower back. She was stunning, with a head of ebony hair that would have rivaled Beverly’s, the tresses folded up in a chignon, bangs straight across her forehead. She wasn’t in denial of her age – instead, she folded it up into how she carried herself, her beauty, gliding down the steps in a one-shouldered golden evening gown, huge diamonds on her wrist and ears. Her painted eyes were pale blue, almond-shaped, and fixed on Hannibal, even as she joined the crowd with her husband.

“Marguerite Lesko, yes. Corsican. Former model. Had a brief musical career that was less than well-received.” Hannibal nodded at Marguerite as she smiled at him, pulling Will closer to himself by the hand on his back, migrating it to his waist to close the distance further. Will felt a surge of catty triumph that was so strong he almost laughed aloud at himself.

Richard Lesko found them first, working through the crowd, trailed by various hangers-on, specifically a general and two government officials. “There he is!” He took Hannibal’s hand and shook it vigorously between both of his own. “There’s the guy keeping me alive. How are ya, doc?”

“Better now, seeing you in good spirits.” Hannibal reclaimed his hand at last.

“Boris,” Marguerite greeted, leaning in to kiss both of his cheeks in the European fashion. Will noted with an unfurling anger that her lips came into direct contact with Hannibal’s skin.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lesko, this is Christopher Roche.”

Will expected some kind of designation, but what exactly, he wasn’t sure. Boyfriend sounded… wrong. What, *paramour* , like what Daphne called her man at the opera?

At least he hadn’t said *friend* .

“Hey, Chris, how the hell are ya.” Will’s hand was swallowed between Richard’s meaty palms for a vigorous shaking he tried to return in strength and enthusiasm. “How’s the food? Did you try those watermelon things? Doc here suggested ‘em, even showed our cooks how to make the roses.”

“One of his favorites,” Will said with a self-satisfied smirk and a glance Hannibal’s way.

Mrs. Lesko’s greeting was far colder. She kissed the air next to Will’s face, and her expression was like she hadn’t enjoyed the taste of said air. “Boris has told me so much about you,” she said, raising a severely plucked, jet-black eyebrow.

“Really?” Will tried to force himself not to blush. *Not now* , he silently ordered his capillaries.

“A forbidden hospital romance. How charming.” Mrs. Lesko raised her champagne to her lips with a tilt to her head that suggested Hannibal’s forged origin story was anything but. She smiled much more warmly at Hannibal. “Dr. Jakov, I have something I’d like to show you; come this way.”

Richard had already moved on to other guests, his entourage at his heels. Hannibal took Will's hand and followed Marguerite as she swished through the crowd, out of the main hall and into a quieter salon, this room all done in white with oriental rugs. She led them past some Louis XV-style seating and Art Nouveau sculptures to a corner where an old book sat under a glass case. It was opened to an engraving of the Wound Man.

"Hans von Gersdorff's *Feldtbuch der Wundartzney.* Printed in Strasburg in 1519. *"* Hannibal's surprise and pleasure at seeing the artifact made Will's blood boil. "It's rare to find a copy."

"I remembered what you said about studying the various incarnations of the Wound Man in your medicine and in your art," Marguerite said, flicking her gaze at Will from beneath thick black lashes, as if she could sense his consternation. "I thought you might like to see an original. It arrived yesterday."

"A treasure." Hannibal let go of Will to bend over and peer through the museum-quality glass.

"I could have it brought upstairs to the study, if you'd like to examine other pages with adequate lighting," Marguerite suggested casually, tapping one long dark red fingernail against her champagne glass.

It was so overt. Will wanted to growl audibly. Luckily, Hannibal was quick to rebuff the attempt to get him alone and away from his… whatever Will was. His "plus one." "Perhaps next time I come to attend to Richard," he said, stepping back and placing his hand on Will's lower spine once more.

As if Hannibal saying his name had conjured him, Richard Lesko appeared, trailed by his cronies. "Hey, doc, the general here's got something you oughta take a look at – I keep telling him he needs to go get it checked out, and I thought, hey, you're right here. Let's step into my office. C'mon, Sanchez, quit draggin' your feet."

General Sanchez seemed sufficiently mortified, but followed Richard as he left the salon. Hannibal set his empty champagne flute on a passing tray. "Excuse me a moment."

"Don't be long, sweetheart," Will dared to call after him. Hannibal didn't turn back entirely, but gave Will enough of his profile to see his wicked little smile.

That left Will with Marguerite, which was uncomfortable to say the least. " *Dites moi* , Christopher," she said, "have you been with Boris long?"

"Uhm, we met in, ah… 2013." Spinning a backstory was easier if some of it was true.

Her eyes widened over her champagne flute. Will had surprised himself with the date as well – Hannibal had been in his life for six, going on seven years. Longer than his own mother had been a part of it.

"Was it love at first sight?" Her question left her mouth like it tasted sour and unripe.

Will considered. “He took me home with him, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It isn’t. I asked you if it was love.” She smiled, an attempt to cover the directness of her question, to smooth over the rudeness. To Will it looked like she grimaced with painted lips.

Will thought of meeting Hannibal for the first time in Jack’s office, how he hadn’t been able to look him in the eye, how *put upon* Hannibal’s presence in his life had made him feel. But beneath it all, there had been an *immediate* attraction to Hannibal’s physical body and the obvious brilliance of his mind. A terrifyingly strong connection seemingly conjured out of thin air.

His excuse that Jack wanted him to be sociable was thinner than the gossamer silk of Marguerite’s dress. He’d stayed behind that day to ask Hannibal out for drinks because he’d wanted to spend time with him. And when they’d gone home together, it had felt so good, so right, and so utterly terrifying that he’d fled, been rude, done what he could to push Hannibal away, only to betray himself and seduce him in his office the next time they’d had a therapy session.

Obsession. Lust. Connection. Bad boundaries. Clutches for balance. When had he discovered that he *loved* Hannibal?

My home doesn’t exist anymore. It won’t exist again until I build another one.

Build it with me.

Will looked directly into Marguerite’s cold eyes. “Y’know what?” he smiled sweetly. “I think it was. How about you and-and Richard? I mean, the way he looks at you – you can just *tell* he adores you.”

“He does.” The two words were poison-smeared daggers and her smile was worse. “When you met Boris, was he seeing anyone? I was engaged when I fell for Richard.”

For Richard’s money, he almost said. “Nope, free as a bird. Would you excuse me?” Will abandoned his glass on a nearby table and headed straight for a set of glass doors that also connected to the lawn and garden. There were a few people out there already with drinks, some of them smoking cigars. Will navigated through them and around the side of the house, stopping at the base of a small-scale reproduction of Michaelangelo’s *David* . He leaned against the base and took a couple of breaths. If he hadn’t gotten out of there he might have said or done something that would blow their cover or ruin the relationship Hannibal had built with the influential upper crust of Havana society.

A memory popped to the surface of his mind; his childhood neighbor, Miss June, pouncing on another woman in the trailer park, scratching and spitting like a hell-cat, the rest of the neighborhood on their stoops egging her on.

You stay away from my man!

The woman June had attacked wound up with a bald patch and a black eye by the time the cops came.

Will smiled ruefully down at his feet, then set off back toward the dock, the path well lit by the light-twined palm trees. The sun had almost set, but he'd go down to the boats, take a quick look, and walk back – just enough time, he hoped, for Hannibal to return and for him to compose himself before seeing Marguerite again. As he walked, hands shoved in his pockets, he felt better enough to chastise himself. Ridiculous to think Hannibal would ever even consider touching her, budding murderer or not.

It was hard to let it go, he had to admit. It meant trusting Hannibal with this, just as he was attempting to learn to trust him with other things.

As he neared the Leskos' yacht, he became aware of a competing strain of music that battled for supremacy with the brassy jazz coming from the party in the big house. It was loud, the bass booming, some kind of reggaeton mixed with the style of dance music that Beverly had enjoyed at Hacienda Las Glorias. There was a woman on the very edge of the prow of the ship next to the railing. She was young, with dark skin and braided hair, wearing a banana-yellow bikini, moving her body in sultry time to the music.

Will stared up at her, not because of her conventionally attractive appearance or the way she danced, but because he was trying to understand what she was doing there. The scene seemed completely at odds with the formal party up at the main house, and it certainly hadn't been going on when they'd arrived.

Suddenly, a man with unkempt dark hair, wearing what appeared to be an open bathrobe, poked his head over the side. "Hey," he called down. "Hey, man, you like her?"

"W-what?"

"Hey, come up here."

Will hesitated. "I'm supposed to, uhm…" He pointed back up at the house.

"Just for a minute! Guys, go." He spoke over his shoulder to someone Will couldn't see. Within a few seconds, two men, dressed similarly to the security guards up at the house, descended the gangway and headed his direction, their steps loud and purposeful on the wooden dock. "Come on up here, man, I promise you won't regret it!" the dark-haired stranger called down to him.

Will considered turning back for the house, but the security guards were closing fast, and it seemed ill-advised to run or make a scene. He quickly noted that only one of them had a pistol tucked in the back of his pants. The other was wearing a tee-shirt and appeared to be unarmed. They were both thickly built, but probably not fast, and not expecting trouble.

He let them escort him up the gangway to the yacht's deck, which was littered with chairs and lounges. More women were in the jacuzzi, another apparently on drink duty, cutting limes at the bar, the other still dancing.

The man who had yelled at him from the deck was on one of the padded lounges, but got up immediately when Will approached. He was wearing pineapple printed swimming trunks, his robe, and a pair of obnoxious orange crocs. A pair of wraparound sunglasses were

perched on his head. He was young, probably 22 or 23, good-looking enough, but flabby in some places and thinner in others, his eyes bloodshot. His hair was a mess. He was sunburned, and his breath smelled like rum and cigars. “Hey,” he greeted, like they were friends already, shaking Will’s hand in his sweaty grip. Will could tell from the amount of pupil in his pale blue eyes that he was on something, he’d have to say coke or meth. “How’s it going? Henry Ford Lesko – Hank’s good – these are my boys Max and Sal – what’d you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” Will said, his voice tight, cautious.

“Look, hey, you didn’t exactly look like you were having fun at my parents’ house. Why don’t you come ‘n join the real party, all right? You like to party, right?”

“Jury’s out on that one.”

“Saw you looking at Claudia.” Hank put his arm around Will’s shoulders. Will shrank away, but Hank held on gamely. “Nice choice, nice choice. Listen, why don’t you grab a drink, have her dance for you a little bit, and then we can make a deal, okay?”

“You have a little…” Will pulled out of Hank’s grip and motioned to the white powder that had gathered under his nostrils.

Hank laughed and rubbed his nose on his sleeve. “Sure, man, all you had to do was ask. C’mere.” He bounced over to the lounge where he’d been sitting and sat down next to a small table, pulling out a baggie of white powder from his robe pocket.

“No, thanks.” Will felt a cold fury consume him as Hank – Marguerite and Richard’s son, most likely – rattled on about women and cocaine and had Will ever partied in Nassau? This kid was Mason Verger if he’d known the word “vibing,” considered himself an “influencer,” and had no interest in the Old Time Religion. Sans pigs.

Somehow, Will now had a Cuba Libre in his hand and another girl smiling at him before she handed off a similar drink to Hank. Hank swatted her ass as she walked away. When she turned back to smile, Will felt the ambient pulse throb in the back of his head as he studied her micro-expressions, the small bruises on her wrist, the way her smile cut across her cheek rather than kissed through it.

Capture bonding, his mind whispered, calling up images of the little boys stolen from their homes, only to return with their twisted new mother to massacre their entire families. *I’m angry about those boys. I can’t give them back what they gave away.*

“She’s nice, too,” Hank said, saluting with his glass, dropping his sunglasses down, even though it was dark. “Another good choice. That’s Zara, and trust me, friend, she is…” He made a chef’s kiss motion with his hand. “I like you, man, you seem cool, so I’ll tell you what – I’ll give you a little try-before-you-buy, okay? There’s a couple of empty cabins below deck–”

“You’re, what, a-a *pimp* ?” Will’s question was half-growled.

Hank launched into a long, rambling explanation of his "business," that the girls were "dancers" he was supporting while they tried to get work at nightclubs, that he "rescued" them from poverty and their upkeep was expensive. Will felt that frosty fury seep through him, quenching the fire of anger and replacing it with something a thousand times more deadly. In the few minutes he was forced to stand there and listen to the spoiled little monster brag about his "side hustles," Will imagined many, many bloody things. All of them felt deliciously righteous.

Mercifully, one of Hank's guards got a call on his phone. After hanging up, he approached Hank. "Your mother says it's time for dinner."

"Fuuuuuuck," Hank groaned. "All right, fine. Wait up for me, man, I'm gonna go change." He disappeared below decks. Will did wait, sipping his drink casually as if he wasn't memorizing the layout of the boat as he stood on deck, taking in the minute nautical details and lines of sight.

Hank emerged in a pair of cargo shorts and a rumpled *guayabera.* "All right, let's get this over with. Girls!" He called over his shoulder as he descended the gangway. "Be good! Or don't, you know what I'm sayin'?" He elbowed Will's side and flashed him a knowing, licentious smile.

They returned to the house and found the rest of the guests claiming their seats at a long dinner table in the mural-walled dining room. Places were assigned, but Will managed to slip around the table to find Hannibal before everyone settled in. "Hiding?" Hannibal asked in a gentle whisper as he put his hand on Will's shoulder, leaning in to speak to him beneath the din of voices and scraping chairs. "Not very sociable. Just as Jack always said."

"Long story," Will told him quickly. "Hope you, ah, didn't worry too much."

"Of course I did." Hannibal winked at him as Will moved away to find his seat. He was all the way at the end of the table, on the corner, giving him line of sight to Hannibal but no chance of conversation. Marguerite had placed "Dr. Jakov" on her left, the General on her right, her husband directly across from her. Hank sauntered in, woefully underdressed, and Marguerite stood again to meet him at his spot at the far end of the table from Will.

Will thought she might chastise him, scold his appearance, or give some expression of displeasure. Instead, she greeted him warmly, kissing his cheeks and running a motherly hand through his hair to try and smooth it. Will couldn't be exactly sure what they said, but was able to catch a few words through lip reading. "Your sunburn looks worse! Have you been wearing the lotion? I'll get you some more aloe tonight."

"Thanks, *Maman* … yeah, it really stings. I fell asleep on the deck again."

Will's physical body sat in his assigned seat and introduced himself to the elderly couple he was positioned between, no small feat considering they both wore hearing aids. The fashion designer and the artist across from him were better company, and he chatted with them amicably enough. But all the time, there was an entire part of his mind that was otherwise occupied, living in the liminal space of his ambient pulse, where blood dripped, its corners haunted by the ghosts of killers and victims.

Perhaps dinner was good. Will didn't taste whatever passed between his lips. His attention was fixed on mother and son. Marguerite asked Hank to tell the table about his new YouTube channel, beaming with pride as he name-dropped celebrities. She made sure to mention his charitable nature, how he helped people in poverty. And, in case anybody didn't know, Hank had been accepted to both Harvard and Yale, but he wasn't able to attend due to his father's issues with the United States government. So busy was she in working her son's accomplishments into conversation, that it was a miracle she still had time to flirt with Hannibal, which she did, once daring to throw a little glance over at Will.

Will didn't react. He was back in time, back in Virginia and New York and Maryland.

Will sat at the Turner's dining room table. Papa and all the brothers and sisters were dead, face-down on their plates, the meal tonight blood and brains and bits of skull. Only Mrs. Turner remained, facing him, a look of sweet forgiveness on her face. No defensive wounds. Only maternal love and maternal heartbreak, the face of Mary in every statue and painting.

Now she wasn't Mrs. Turner. She was Marguerite Lesko, and he was Hank, pointing the gun. The dead children at the table were the girls from the boat, tricked into this life, promised safety and money, now sold to the highest bidder or enjoyed by Hank himself.

Marguerite knew what her son was. She chose to warp her reality into accepting it. In the face of anything and everything he'd done, had done, or would do, she loved him. And instead of being beautiful and selfless, it was sickening.

"There's something foreign about the concept of family, like an ill-fitting suit," he said to her.

This family was one he would never want to climb inside, whether the suit fit or not. It was patterned in blindness, sewn with ill-gotten gain, and made of the fabric of exploitation.

Dessert came and went. The band moved out onto the lawn, playing slower, more soothing fare, adding a vocalist with a velvet, cigarette-smooth voice. Guests slowly trickled away. The old couple danced under the moon, its brilliance vividly revealed as the cloud cover swept aside like the raising of a stage curtain. Will stuck close by Hannibal, joining him on a cushioned wicker loveseat that overlooked a carefully-maintained decorative pond, full of plants and flowers and colorful fish.

They watched in rapt silence as Hank and his mother met beneath a tree, Hank's security standing a respectful distance away. The conversation was unintelligible, benign enough until each began to raise their voices. Just when it seemed like an argument might break out, Hank took his mother's hand and kissed her cheek. He was about to turn away when she snagged his arm and stopped him. Reaching into her bodice, she withdrew a small roll of bills and handed it over. He gave her a hug and another kiss, then retreated to the yacht. Within a few minutes, the obnoxious music had started again, competing with the jazzy fare, especially this particularly slow number.

Now Marguerite was saying goodbye to the General and his wife, but stealing glances over her shoulder at Hannibal.

“She’s gonna try and come over here, isn’t she?” Will drained his after-dinner café Cubano and set the cup next to Hannibal’s on a nearby side table.

“Undoubtedly. She’ll likely suggest we stay overnight, then find some way to cajole me out of our bed and into her own.” Hannibal looked directly at Will as he said ‘our bed,’ perhaps to gauge his reaction. “It’s best we thwart her efforts.” He stood and offered Will his hand. Will took it and stood next to him, keeping Hannibal’s palm in his grip.

“Head home?”

Hannibal brushed a curl behind Will’s ear with a secret little smile. “I was going to suggest a dance.”

Will let an incredulous little laugh slip. Hannibal beamed at him benevolently, but there was a glimmer in his eyes that revealed a sweet truth – he’d only been half-joking.

Will caught Marguerite’s gold dress shimmering in the restive moonlight, undulating as she walked towards them. He pretended not to notice. “How ‘bout this instead?” He put one hand behind Hannibal, resting it against the top rise of his backside, and curled the fingers of his other into Hannibal’s pinstriped lapel. Hannibal took him in his arms without hesitation and accepted Will’s kiss with eager grace.

Will’s entire body was overtaken by heat and vibration, a roaring in his ears that wasn’t the ocean. The competing strains of music droned away into nothingness, waves of sound mingling as they swirled down a drain into darkness. Will angled his mouth and slipped his tongue in at just the right moment, and Hannibal welcomed it warmly, pulling Will closer by the small of his back, fingers in his hair now, gently winding their way through his curls.

Will tasted coffee and sugar and Hannibal, a sweet concoction that mingled with his memories and the current moment. He let Hannibal reciprocate, his tongue in Will’s mouth now, a little deeper than Will had sent his, but without being invasive or impatient. Now just their lips together, mouths slightly open, his hand stroking Hannibal’s shaven face, feeling only the slightest texture there, his fingertips enjoying the angles of his cheekbone and jawline and the inviting silk of his skin.

More, his body begged piteously. *It’s been so long!*

More, his ego demanded. *Show her that he’s yours.*

Will was proud of himself for ignoring both and breaking the kiss off, albeit reluctantly. He allowed himself, however, to be exceedingly pleased with how hard Hannibal was breathing now, only just able to compose himself before Marguerite approached, undeterred, it seemed, by their display.

“Did you enjoy yourselves tonight, my friends?” Her words addressed them both, but she didn’t even look at Will.

“It was a lovely party,” Hannibal complimented with a nod of his head. “I’m afraid it’s time to say goodnight – is Richard nearby? I’d like to wish him a good evening.”

“He sends his regrets – he’s slipped off to bed.” At the mention of her husband’s name, her eyes went from softly amorous to pieces of broken aquamarine and obsidian. “Thank you for coming. I’m sure I’ll see you Thursday, Boris, for Richard’s checkup.”

“ *Buenas noches* .” Hannibal accepted her lingering cheek kisses, and Will put up with her hurried brushes of air against the side of his face.

They returned to the dock, where some other kind of party was in full swing. Neon lights of various colors pulsated on the deck above in time to the music, and the air was filled with drunken laughter and shouting. The dancing girl was no longer alone at the prow of the ship – now she had one of the government dignitaries with her, the tall man who had been two seats down from Will at the dinner table. He was trying to take off her bikini top one-handed. The girl – Claudia, if that was her name – allowed the treatment, but her face was grim and disgusted when the official wasn’t able to see it. When he did look, her smile was wide but painfully fake.

Will thought he would be angry, but instead, he felt only the deadly, calculating calm that had consumed him earlier. His mouth tasted like Hannibal, and premeditation.

The boat ride back was quiet, the motor again preventing much conversation. Hannibal sat with his arm slung over the back of the bench seat, and Will leaned unselfconsciously into him, tilting his body until the back of his head rested on Hannibal’s shoulder, nestled between it and his neck. He let his hand splay, warm and heavy, against Hannibal’s knee, moving his thumb in a soothing circular motion. Whether the action was meant to bring Hannibal some kind of peace, or himself, he didn’t know, didn’t care. What was good for one of them was good for the other.

Every so often, Hannibal would kiss the top of his head, gentle little presses of his lips.

Hannibal paid their boatman, and he motored away after promising Will he would check the propeller in the morning. They lingered in these moments, walking slowly, hand in hand, up the dock, across the beach, and back to the path that led to the houses. The lights in Magdaly’s cottage were out, and the only sounds that cradled the compound were insects, frogs, and ocean. It was paradise after the constant stimulation of other people and the competing music. Will felt more relaxed and centered with every step.

They paused in front of Will’s door. Luz was out on the veranda, laying on her side. Her tail thumped for a few beats but she didn’t bother getting up to greet them otherwise.

Hannibal opened his arms as a tender invitation, and Will accepted, resting his hands on his lapels as Hannibal circled the small of his back. Will dipped his forehead forward and pressed it against Hannibal’s neck and shoulder for a long, heavenly moment. He couldn’t stop the sigh of relieved contentment that came out of his lungs.

Hannibal tilted Will’s chin up with a delicate motion, easily resisted, if Will had wanted to, which he absolutely didn’t. The kiss was sweet heat, passion muzzled, in bit and bridle but desperate to cast the constraints aside. Still, they each kept in check, even as Will’s tongue darted out again and Hannibal made a wordless sound of appreciation.

Passion is good. It gets the blood pumping.

Will broke it off and put one hand on Hannibal's shoulder. The other he clasped against Hannibal's palm, bending up their elbows. "Is that dance still available, or, ah… did I miss my chance?"

"With no music?" Hannibal was moving anyway, just a little bit of sway, guiding Will's hips with his hand. Will rested his cheek against Hannibal's with another unconscious sigh. There was no choreography, no plan, really, just a gentle rocking motion, and a side-step from one or the other every so often.

The tranquility was broken only by the nearly indiscernible hitches in Hannibal's breathing, and Will's own skin aching to be set free. He was hyper aware of every inch of clothing between them, a shirt and jacket apiece, belts and briefs and trousers, maddening vanguards all.

"Will," Hannibal breathed into his ear. "I have a confession to make."

"Hmm. Go ahead."

He felt Hannibal's smile against the side of his face. He didn't speak immediately, as if choosing his words. "I know you said it facetiously, but I found it endearing to be addressed as your sweetheart."

Will's stomach was all trembling wings. He couldn't help the stupidly happy grin that pulled at the corners of his mouth, showing off his teeth. "Really?"

"Yes," Hannibal admitted.

The admission earned him another kiss. It started innocently enough, but neither seemed to be able to block the flow of passion from soaking it completely, flooding the moment, leaving rich silt in the basin from which things could grow.

At last, Hannibal broke it off and stole a moment just to look at Will, stroking the side of his face in a longing, loving gesture.

Will smiled up at him through an errant curl. "I met someone tonight."

"Oh?"

"Someone I'd like to kill."

Hannibal drew him close, lifting his chin again for the kiss. "Music to my ears," he said, just before their lips touched.

Season 4 Episode 5: Ifá

Chapter Summary

Magdaly predicts the puppies will arrive. Will stays up late to see if her divination is true. Hannibal sees his lights on and comes to join the vigil. Childhood traumas revisited, and Hannibal at last tells Will what happened to Mischa.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “To Build a Home” by The Cinematic Orchestra

“There is a house built out of stone
Wooden floors, walls and window sills
Tables and chairs worn by all of the dust
This is a place where I don't feel alone
This is a place where I feel at home
'Cause, I built a home
For you
For me
Until it disappeared
From me
From you
And now, it's time to leave and turn to dust
Out in the garden where we planted the seeds
There is a tree as old as me
Branches were sewn by the color of green
Ground had arose and passed it's knees
By the cracks of the skin I climbed to the top
I climbed the tree to see the world
When the gusts came around to blow me down
I held on as tightly as you held onto me
I held on as tightly as you held onto me
And, I built a home
For you
For me
Until it disappeared
From me
From you
And now, it's time
To leave and turn
To dust.”

I awaken, heart pounding, in the stifling dark.

Stretched out on my back beneath the lacy drape of mosquito netting, I explore the boundary between sleep and consciousness. My heart rate, accelerated in response to dreaming, does not bend to my will until I have gotten out of bed and forced my body to endure a cold shower.

Under the unpleasant rush of cool water, I reorient myself. It has been a long day in Havana attending to Richard Lesko, General Sanchez, and Sanchez's daughter. Unable to decline a supper invitation without resorting to rudeness, I had returned to our island and gone to bed, Will nowhere to be found.

I found him in my dreams instead, as I do each night – beautiful, detailed, intricate dreams that I can sometimes control. Other times, like tonight, I am delighted to be at their mercy. It is better when it is no fault of my own.

Being a man of my word has held me up for the entirety of my life, the vertebrae of my *imago* of myself. I have come to understand, through self-analysis, and interacting with Will, that I developed this way because of what happened to Mischa. I promised myself and my dead parents and my sister that I would care for her. I was unable to fulfill that promise. I have driven myself under a torturous whip to keep every promise since. Only now have I learned that there are some promises I cannot keep, despite my allegiance to them.

It makes me ache. I want to reject the notion, deny the truth, which is this; sometimes, chaos reigns, even in me.

I must be a thousand times more judicious, going forward, about giving my word of honor.

I've already promised myself, and promised Will, that our relationship is to progress at a rate where we open ourselves to intimacy with a sweet but frustrating slowness, the kind suffered by young people as they transition into adulthood. Objectively, I understand why I made this promise. Will and I have weilded sex as deadly weaponry against one another. We took turns inflicting wounds, deep and dangerous and bleeding beauty. But that time has come and gone, and it must stay far away until each of us heals.

Our trust in one another is a mass of knotted scar tissue. It will take a long stretch of time to smooth over, if it ever does. Again, objectively, I know this to be true. As a clinician, I understand what kind of treatment we both need in order to progress our relationship into something beyond what it has been, to reach a sweet and easy equilibrium where I am Hannibal and he is Will, and that does not change when we are together, illuminating us instead.

It is imperative that I keep my word, giving my affection in tiny, judicious increments, and accepting only in kind, despite what Will may think he wants.

Without an external mode of expression, my cabin-fevered desire loses its mind, and runs rampant in my dreams.

While I can't be sure, I don't believe that I am connecting with Will the way I did when we were half a world apart. He is here with me. I see him daily, I speak with him, I nurture our love and connection. No, what happens behind my eyes at night is my animal frustration attempting to work itself out. And, as unfulfilling as the dream encounters are compared to what I could have in waking life, I am grateful for the morsels I receive, tossed offhandedly from the dinner table to me, where I sit on my haunches, a hopeful, loyal pet.

Besides, they give me inspiration for things I may be able to have in the future, if Will is amenable.

Tonight's dream was part memory, a beautiful retelling of the night I convinced Will to let me tie him up, something I also enjoyed when he was in prison. How his sweet lip trembled, telling me he'd never done it before, and how he'd quivered under my hand, so clearly afraid yet willing to give himself over to me. His trust was nearly as arousing as his body had been, stretched out on my bed with his wrists bound, the sheen of sweat on his brow and traveling the line of his sternum. I violated both that night, though Will was more than pleased with the physical treatment.

The dream diverged from memory when instead of stimulating his prostate to induce orgasm, I penetrated him. The fantasy was so vivid that recalling it now, even standing beneath a cascade of cold water, I cannot control my physical arousal. Wrapped inside of Will's body, in the warm cradle of his opening, resting there until I am permitted to thrust, harder and harder as he sweats and pants and moans and tosses back his head, offering me his ivory throat, daring me to taste his pulse – my brain replays it for me and I put one hand on the wall of the shower, the other on myself. Being Will's first in so many things was an honor and a miracle wrapped in what I told myself at the time was an exercise in manipulation.

I wonder what virginities he has left that I might take.

I climax at the thought.

The inevitable clarity makes my higher self regain supremacy. What virginities Will has left that he might *give* me, gifts freely bestowed in love, not because I trick him into surrender or even ask for them.

As much as I want them. All of them, every unspeakable act, every animal movement driven by lust and instinct.

I dry off and consider what virginities Will took from me. Before Will, I did not think myself capable of the kind of love that enslaves most of the human population. I had never wanted a child until I saw the chance to offer him one. Offer it to both of us, as a family. In some aspects, Will ravished me just as violently as I him. He broke my heart. That was a first. I gave up my autonomy for him. My freedom, physical, mental, and spiritual.

Did he, in fact, *take* these things from me, or did I unwittingly offer them up, not knowing what I gave away?

As innocent as Will seemed when he came into my life, there were certain shadows within him that lay dormant until awakened. Some of them I called forth purposely, conjured and nurtured them. Others came to harm me – Will's capacity for manipulation, for one, giving as good as he got.

All of that is behind us now. It can be lost in the past, defanged, replaced, if I can only keep my self-control. It is entirely up to me. I have no doubt that if I beckoned, Will would tumble into my bed without a second thought. He would let me have him as I wished, every night a feast. A touch, a word, these tiny, soft things are all that would be required.

And it could be different. Though I am deeply nostalgic for those early days, I know Will is no longer a trembling virgin. Just as delightful would be presenting myself to him for the taking. I imagine him walking through the front foyer, climbing the staircase to my bedroom, and finding me asleep, as he did not long before I left Baltimore. He would seize the moment of vulnerability, grappling me into submission. Of all things, I miss the give and take, strength to strength, wit against wit, how we flowed so seamlessly between kiss and kill.

I am transported back to that night when he offered me the knife, a token of promise. I can almost feel the sensation of him inside me, as though I have consumed him, a ritual of ownership.

With a shaky sigh, I am forced to return to the shower.

Later, I attempt to go back to bed. I have chosen this particular chamber because it has a small balcony that overlooks the back garden, offering a perfect view of Will's cabana house. Many times I have lingered at the glass door, or out by the stone railing in the darkness, watching him.

Voyeurism is a particular delight of mine. As far back as I can remember it has brought me a hearty satisfaction. There is an added layer of titillation when I watch Will without his knowledge. This is due, no doubt, to the sexual nature of our relationship. The only thing better is watching someone I'm planning to kill, and the superiority is nearly untraceable.

To my surprise, the lights are on in Will's house. A soft lamp in the front room, and the light over the stove. Dim, but sufficient for me to see Will sitting on the sofa. He is in profile. I can just make out the top edge of a book.

It isn't long before he's up and moving to pour himself a drink at the bar. I silently cry for mercy; when he stands I realize he is shirtless. He is clad from the waist down in light sleepwear, the pale blue fabric thin and clinging to him in a way that spikes my blood pressure and saturates my brainstem with the chemicals of arousal. He has new definition in his chest and abdominals, the cut of his hips sharply evident before they are obscured by his clothing. He turns to the side and raises the drink to his lips and I wonder if I'm going to have a cardiac event. All of the softness he'd accumulated after the fall, when he was, according to Magdaly, a body without a soul, is entirely gone. I realize he must be doing more in the gym than his physical therapy.

Because he wants to be strong enough to kill? Or because he wants to look beautiful for me?

Both, if I am lucky.

Since Will confessed to me that he has chosen a victim and begun a design, the difficulty I face denying myself his physical love has increased a thousand-fold. That moment, when we danced in the dark, and he kissed me and told me who he wanted to murder, was as rare and precious to me as any ancient artifact or crumbling manuscript. As the entire city of Florence. I would burn Firenze to the ground, wipe it off the map, just to kill with him again and make love after.

That night, and each night since, my dreams have rioted.

Will moves out of my view for a few minutes. I wait, unmoving, with the practiced patience I've accumulated over decades of stalking. Then, the door to the little house opens and Will steps out. He runs his hand through his hair, then across his face. Now he stands, hands on his hips, surveying the nighttime garden. I silently urge him to step out from beneath the protection of the veranda, to let the moonlight travel the contours of his body, but he does not oblige me. Instead, he paces from one end of the covered porch to the other side. Briefly, he sits in the rocking chair, but is up again in no time.

As he opens the door to go back inside, I can just make out the sound of his voice. He is speaking to someone through a smile. Before my imagination can invent any reason for this that would enrage me, logic brings me the answer. He paces like a father in a birthing ward.

At last, his dog is whelping.

I smile benevolently at his profile as he returns to the couch and attempts to pick up the book, but I acknowledge the tiniest sliver of disappointment. It would have pleased me more if he suffered insomnia because he, too, was thinking of me.

Still, it provides an egress. I dress casually; linen pants, a shirt unbuttoned at the neck, sleeves rolled up. It is tempting to wear something far more formal, with all of the "fucking buttons and hooks and zippers" that have frustrated Will in the past as a buffer, as my armor; they never deterred him in the past. Only my mind and my honor stand in our way. I will test their strength.

When Will answers my knock, he is wearing one of the simple shirts he's always liked sleeping in. How chaste. It only fuels my desire; now I know I saw something I wasn't meant to see. "Hey," he greets, stepping back to let me in, a simple but inviting gesture. "What are you doing up?" A glance at the sun-shaped mid-century clock on the wall tells me it is after midnight. "Magdaly said you had an early start this morning."

"I did." I pause to glance over to the side of the front room where there are no windows. The furniture has been moved, and there is a child's plastic wading pool on the floor lined with towels. Luz is laying in it on her side, watching me with careful eyes. She does not seem to be in labor. "I woke up and saw your lights on. Is it time?"

"I think so," Will says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully; I revel in every scratch of his fingertips against his stubble. "She barely touched her breakfast and she, ah, skipped dinner altogether."

“She’s nesting,” I say. “Seems to be a strong indication.”

“Right.” Will kneels by the plastic pool and strokes the dog’s head. Her tail twitches, but is far less enthusiastic in response to Will’s attention than what I’ve observed in the past. He stands, returns to me. “Besides… Magdaly said tonight’s the night. Three am.” He half-smiles, knowing how illogical it sounds. “She brought me some extra towels yesterday and, ah, let me know what time it’s gonna happen.”

“And you found sleep to be out of the question.”

He rubs the back of his head. “Yeah.”

If the witch is correct, we have three hours until labor begins. I can think of many things to fill the time. Instead, I bite my tongue, just a brief squeeze between my front teeth with my lips closed. He picks up his drink and finishes it, then turns from me to bring his glass to the sink. The sleepwear drapes just so on the curves of his backside, their deliberate sculpture more evident up close. One does not need powerful and defined gluteus muscles to kill someone. Those are for me, and they tempt me so severely I break out in a sweat.

“Two insomniacs,” I say, and I am pleased at how casual my voice sounds as I pretend to examine the book he was reading, splayed out like a fresh kill on the arm of the sofa. Hemingway.

“Least we’re not lonely.” Despite his obvious vigilance, watching over the dog, and a touch of awkwardness with my presence in his home at this hour, Will yawns into the back of his hand. “Guess we’ll have to find a way to stay up all night.”

Oh, Will, don’t you *dare* .

“Sorry,” he apologizes hastily. “I didn’t mean that to be… uh, I wasn’t trying to be, um… *lewd* .”

I only smile my forgiveness while my desire rampages along every nerve. “Coffee?” I suggest.

“Yes. Please,” he adds. Mercy, Will, don’t use that word!

Soon, we are on the sofa together. Aesthetically, it is my least favorite piece in the house – while so many other furnishings are either sleek suggestions of what designers in the 1940s thought the future would bring, or heavy, dark-carved Victorian things, this couch is quite ordinary, with wide cushions and padded arms. Its color is its saving grace – a rich cerulean, accented with lime throw pillows. I appreciate it now for other reasons as I sit with Will and realize that we could make love on it without much trouble.

The dog is restless. She rises, paws at the towels and blankets in the nest, then flops down again. “That’s a good sign,” Will tells me, setting his coffee down. “It’s crazy, but I think Magadaly was right again.”

“Is this your first canine birth?”

“No,” he says. I notice a line appear between his eyes. He is troubled. I want to know why. “When I adopted Ellie, I didn’t know she was pregnant.” He sighed, leaning back on the sofa and dropping his head against the rise in the cushion, eyes on the ceiling. More accurately, on memory. “I already had six dogs.” The regret in his voice is palpable. “Luckily they were cute and, ah… easy to give away.”

“That wasn’t the first time.” I am not entirely aware of how I perceived this, but I have come to know Will’s microexpressions so well, I require very little to make an inference.

“No,” Will says. “It wasn’t.” He leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. To avoid explanation, he drinks coffee. When he cannot avoid it, he speaks. “My dog Bandit got my neighbor’s dog pregnant. I took care of her, and I helped her, and after they were born I thought – I mean, I was just a kid, what, like ten or eleven – this was in Michigan, I think…” He trails off, and I am swept into his eyes as he looks at me, plaintively, a silent plea for comfort. Comforting what, I do not know, but I can imagine where this story ends. “My neighbor, he–he put all the pups in a bag and he said he was taking them to the river.” His tongue steals out between his lips. Then he pinches them shut, as if he doesn’t want to say the words.

Then a sudden smile, a burst of light. “I, uh, I punched him in the balls when he was on the way to his truck and I took the bag. I ran… out of the trailer park, down the highway – shit, probably two or three miles, until I got to the truck stop. And I found a guy driving a rig, headed out of state. I begged him to take them. I told him how he-he could bottle feed them, and they’d be all right, and when they were bigger he could give them away. And he said he would. He, um, he patted my head and he said he would. And he took the bag and he drove off.”

“You don’t believe him,” I say softly. “You didn’t believe him then and you don’t now.”

“There was something in his expression – t-the way he talked to me.” Will shrugs, rubs his cheek, takes another sip of coffee. He won’t look at me. “He felt sorry for me. That’s why he said he would. But, I mean… what truck driver is gonna keep six puppies in his rig and bottle feed them every hour?”

“You would,” I say. “If you were a truck driver.”

This makes him smile, even if his eyes are still sad. “I mean, maybe he did. Who’s to say.” He scoffs out a miserable laugh. “I thought I was gonna get the beating of my life when I got home. But my dad stood up for me. He fought the guy instead. Kicked his ass, as memory serves.”

“In the wake of pain and loss,” I say, draping my arm over the back of the couch, hoping he will come to me as he did on the boat ride home last week, “you were given a memory of your father that you treasure keenly.”

Will reads my cue and he responds immediately, with the relief of someone casting off a backbreaking burden. He leans into me and I pull him close. Closer. Soon, without speaking, we have made a nest of our own. I lay back on the cushioned arm of the sofa and he leans against my chest, his head resting against my shoulder and neck, tucked under my chin. I am

aware of the length of his body between my legs and work furiously to be unaware of it. I take one of his hands in my own and press them together over his heart.

Reveling in his scent and the warm weight of his body is a luxury; I fear it will cost me dearly. This does not deter me; I run the fingers of my free hand through his hair, combing it back over his forehead. He relaxes now, the claws of the past unhooked from him. They leave their scars, to be sure, but he is no longer being actively torn by them. I memorize how his eyelashes rest on his cheeks, the contrast of ebony against petals.

He opens his eyes and turns his head as the dog rises again to paw at the bedding; he settles in again as she does. "Hannibal," he says softly, enunciating every letter in my name. I know he is going to ask me for something. I pray I can give it to him; nothing pleases me more than giving Will what he wants. In the past, this urge has not been in my best interest. "Will you ever – believe me, you can say no, and I would understand – but I thought, maybe… you could tell me about Mischa now."

This was not what I expected. I was unguarded against this and now I am stricken. I cannot speak. My hand slips free of his hair.

"You know I went to Lithuania," he continues. It is a blessing we are not looking at one another directly. He is facing away from me toward the kitchen, and I am able to focus only on the texture of his hair or the lines of the hand he has resting on my knee.

"I know." My voice is small and unbecoming.

"I saw her grave."

I clear my throat before I answer; it is a soft but significant sound. "Is the stone still legible?"

"Yes." He angles to look up at me. I weaken under his gaze. "I cleaned off the headstone."

"Thank you, Will." He performed for her the same simple, loving act of service. I know now why he keeps fixing shutters and rehanging doors and changing light bulbs; each gesture a kiss. I resume stroking his hair.

My mind rails against it, arguing that now is not the time. When confronted, this notion is leaky at best. The right time does not exist.

I acknowledge this. Yet I cannot bring myself to begin with Mischa, or even my parents. I hold Will, his body my anchor, his scent and his breath wind in the sail as I traverse the currents of time, history, memory.

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I begin with the Visconti of Milan, a noble family of the city-state, their coat of arms depicting a biscione – a coiling azure serpent – swallowing a child. This emblem can still be seen in stone – I saw it, many years ago – on the Archbishop's Palace in the Piazza Duomo. One of this ancient line, Matteo de Visconti, was accused of necromancy and heresy. Petrarch was a close friend of the family.

If Will is impatient, or curious, or confused, he makes no sign. It is better, I think, that he is facing away from me. I can see his expressions, but we are not looking directly at one another. His hand still rests on my knee, and is the only part of him that moves, sliding up a few inches above the patella.

The Visconti melded with the Sforza when there was no heir apparent. The twin facades of Santa Maria Incoronata represent the union of Bianca Maria Visconti and Francesco Sforza, builder of the original church. The history of the Sforza fills volumes, and I gloss over most of it, until I at last reveal the reason why I am telling him all of this.

My mother's name was Simonetta Sforza.

Her family fled post-WWII Italy to escape anti-aristocracy sentiment. She met my father – Count Andrius Lecter – in Vilnius. They were young, very much in love, and married quickly, only to seek shelter at Castle Lecter, leaving the city behind. The only other Lecter still living was my great-grandmother, Grazina Lecter, and they cared for her there, even as the castle crumbled around them. The war took most of the Lecter fortune. The plan, I assume, was to repair the property using money from my mother's family.

I am born. Mischa is born.

My great-grandmother, her mind crumbling like the castle walls, tells me stories. I spend more time with her than anyone – her condition saddens my father and scares my mother, but her vacant eyes, palsy, toothless mouth, and balding head do not frighten me. I do not shy away from reminders of mortality. She tells me that there is a cave on our property where a treasure is hidden. Paintings, gold bars, jewels – the horde of my birthright. These things were secured long ago, to hide them from the Nazis, and now, from the Soviets.

When I ask my parents about it, they say it's a legend, that the old woman is mad, and that I am to forget what she told me. This convinces me more than anything that the cave exists. I search the woods, the river, everywhere I can, and still, I find nothing.

Grazina dies. The government comes calling. The Soviets are claiming our property as their own. Castle Lecter is to be repurposed as an orphanage and childrens' hospital. We are permitted to live in the hunting lodge nestled in the woods. We are given very little time to move. Whatever is left behind is stolen.

We are, however, happy in the forest. The days are beautiful and simple. We learn our lessons from our mother, and we play in the woods, no matter the season, conjuring a thousand games of make-believe. We grow our own food, keep rabbits and chickens. My father works intermittently in the nearest city as a clerk, a count reduced to filing papers for the government that stripped him of what little he had left.

All but the treasure in the cave.

I am 11 years old when my parents die. Mischa is 9. They are killed in a car accident. It is only later that I am able to discover the mysterious circumstances that surround it, my first criminal investigation. I will learn that my father was connected to the Lithuanian Freedom

Fighters and Adolfas Ramanauskas – known as Vanagas. His ability to hide his identity saved him from the purges. Their killing was political.

The authorities promise that my uncle has been contacted, and he is coming to collect us. We are to wait in the lodge. It won't be more than a few days. Then they leave. Mischa and I are alone in the cottage in the woods like some kind of fairytale – the bloody stories, not the glossed-over retellings.

I am on my honor, now, to care for my sister. And I do. I know how to slaughter the rabbits, how to set snares for small game, and yes, Will, even how to fish the river. A few days turns into months. The snow melts and then it returns and no one has come for us until someone does.

Workers have been busy converting the castle into the orphanage. In the process, they discovered some journals and papers belonging to my great grandmother and her husband. These mention the treasure cave. One night, four men break down the door of the hunting lodge and demand to know where the cave is.

I can't tell them what I don't know, but they do not believe me. They threaten Mischa. They bind us and beat us and promise to kill us both. Just as dawn breaks, Mischa gets free. The men are arguing amongst themselves. Three of them wish to abandon the endeavor. One is very vocal that he will not kill a child, and there is still time to walk away from the whole mess.

Mischa frees me and we escape out a window. I lead her toward the castle, in hopes that there will be other workers there, or government officials, someone to help us. It is so early in the morning that the place is deserted. One man chases us; the rest have given up. He tackles Micha and she splits her head against the edge of the fountain with the angel statue.

I will never forget the sound it made. I knew at that moment, before the waves left my ears, that she was dead.

I turn on the man. I attack him. I had never raised a hand against another person in my life. I free my instinct and let it guide me, and I bite his throat, tearing his flesh.

It was not enough to kill him. He flees.

So much blood on the snow. In my mouth. I swallow the flesh I have taken.

I have spent decades developing theories to explain why I did what I did next. None of them fit. I can only recount my actions.

I takemy sister home. I clean her and brush her hair, scrape the dirt from beneath her nails. Then I open up her abdomen and remove her heart, lungs, and liver. I cook and eat them. After, I arrange her as lovingly as I can in her favorite dress, and bury her in the woods.

With her went any trace of civilization. I do not read, bathe, or practice music. I hunt, eat, sleep. At night I look at the stars, and sometimes I scream at them. Word travels of the feral boy in bloodstained clothes, and at last, state authorities intervene. I am placed in the

orphanage at Castle Lecter, a final insult. I live much as you did when you first arrived here, Will. A body without a soul. I follow commands but I do not speak. I am not effectively conscious. I am in the memory palace with my sister.

It is a blessing, however; my name exists in the system now, which allows my uncle Robertas to at last be free of Soviet red tape. He comes for me and takes me to Paris at age 13.

I live with him, and my aunt Murasaki. Murasaki's attendant, Chiyoh, is Mischa's age, but seems older than I am. She pledges her honor to protect me and bring me out of the memory palace and back into the waking world. And she is able to do it, coaxing me back to life.

After we lose Robertus to a heart attack, it is only Murasaki and Chiyoh and myself. I attend boarding school in Paris and reside with them when I am not traveling. Over time, each of them become aware of what I am and what I am capable of. It is best that I leave.

I move to Florence, and make my first kill. I become Il Monstro. Then, I encounter Inspector Pazzi at the Uffizi gallery. My flat is raided. I realize I've been careless, and it is time to leave Europe.

I am admitted to Johns Hopkins and plan to leave for America. Before I go, however, I track down the man that killed my sister. I take Chiyoh to Castle Lecter and tell her to wait. I kidnap my sister's killer and I bring him to the place where she died. Chiyoh told you what happened and you know why she stayed. You met the man, and you arranged his death, Will. Chiyoh told me of his wings and your design. It is one of the greatest gifts you've given me.

Medical school, residency, the emergency room, then back to study psychology, and, at last, private practice. All these things are secondary to murder.

Once I am on my own in America, my becoming is complete. I kill and eat.

And then, Will, I met you.

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My story brings us to the witching hour. Even then, Will is so attentive to me he does not realize that the dog is giving birth. He only notices once he hears the puppies making their little cries and whines. Just in time to see the final pup emerge. Will counts placentas and checks each little creature, rubbing them with a soft towel. Will tells me it is likely this is the dam's first litter because it is so small – just three; two caramel-colored like their mother, the other jet black. All female.

"She knew exactly what to do." Will is visibly proud of Luz. He brings her water and lets her alone so the pups can nurse. He washes his hands and returns to me with a glass of Magdaly's limonada, a silent gesture that acknowledges how much I have spoken. I accept gratefully; the past makes one thirsty.

I drink; he watches the dogs, forehead wrinkled in thought. I know he is empathizing with me, absorbing my story. He wants to see me. Know me. There is no rejection of my rare gift now. Never again. This brings me the sweet and easy peace I imagine the Angel-Maker

sought. Will prays over me, in his own way, as I pray over him, though we speak to no gods but ourselves. To play at God is to be alone, unless you are no longer alone.

When I set the glass down, Will slides into my arms again. He faces me this time, and encourages me without speaking to lay back, my head on the arm rest, my ankles on the opposite. He shifts on top of me and I bend a leg to let him lay between them. We are chest to chest, and he rests his ear over my heart.

We have our silence. Knowing we do not need to speak soothes me as much as Will's embrace does, his thumb making slow circles on my shoulder. He wishes I had been spared the pain of my childhood. I wish the same for him. Both of us understand perfectly what is done is done. We are here now, together, to be who we are.

Now I shift my position and move him beneath me. He reclines on the arm rest. The rounded edge of it tilts his head back, cradling the base of his skull, which opens up his throat to me. I can tell by the way his lips slide open, by his hooded eyes, that he wants me to kiss him, and so I do. He encourages me with a hand on my hip and the other behind my head, gliding up into my hair. Will tastes like the past and the future at once, both familiar and unexplored.

Exploration is tempting. Too tempting to resist, it seems. I sneak my fingers beneath the hem of his shirt and push it up enough to rest my palm beneath. I feel for his scar, and I find defined muscle there. The skin just above his navel is soft and almost preternaturally smooth. I ache to put my lips there instead, but I dare not. Though my desire for him has evolved since I fantasized about him earlier in the night. I want him, yes, but in the simplest way possible, acts of sweet comfort to bring satisfaction.

I glide the plane of his chest beneath the shirt until my fingertips touch the bar of his clavicle, but I am careful not to brush either nipple. I can sense they are erect, but I do not allow myself to look or touch. I only kiss him in the dulcet blackness behind my eyes as his hand on my waist finds its way beneath my shirt as well, visiting the divots of my hips and the valley of my lumbar spine.

His tongue greets mine, but politely, and I respond in kind. Just when I am proud of myself for staying in check, I hear the sweet call of his throat and I am powerless. Will does not help matters with the sound he makes when my lips touch the graceful curve.

The better angels have flown away and I am left with the thousand-eyed-and-winged monstrosities instead. Be not afraid. I take their advice and brush my teeth against the favored spot, where his neck meets his shoulder. His breath shudders softly against my ear. We stand at the cliff's edge again. I could pull us over, or he could push, or we might work in tandem, as we did the night we slew the dragon.

Instead, we are suddenly still. Maintaining equilibrium.

I pull away first, and back off of him. We get to our feet and cross the room to check on Luz. She is licking one pup while the others sleep against her, soothed by her heart as Will is by mine, a childhood instinct he never outgrew. It is his to use as he wishes and it is my duty to make sure he knows this.

He turns away from the dogs and embraces me now, a reassuring squeeze that I return for several moments.

“Goodnight, Will,” I say.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” he says. There is the tiniest lilt to the second half of the word, the ghost of the Southern United States. *Sweethahrt* .

“Congratulations,” I say to the dog, and take my leave.

Season 4 Episode 6: Toque de Santo

Chapter Summary

Will finally gets to say "this is my design" and it's actually HIS design...!

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Something to Believe In” by Young the Giant

“It gets old when you talk to the sun
And your tongue understood uh-no one
Can it be that I hear what he's saying?
Is there a reason why I'm still awake?
And he says, "I've got you written in a black book by the railroad track. You see, I know your fate."
(Ooh)
And I said, "you've got to listen, I'm a songbird with a brand new track. You underestimate."
I'll give you something to believe in
Put out the basement full of demons
Realize you're a slave to your mind, break free
Now give me something to believe in
Just give me...
Just give me something to believe in
Everyday when I speak to the moon
Pale as a ghost in the afternoon
Tragedy has a hold of my mind
But I can see the light between the lines
And I said, "you've got to listen, I'm a songbird with a brand new track. You underestimate."
I'll give you something to believe in
Put out the basement full of demons
Realize you're a slave to your mind, break free
Now give me something to believe in
Promise me
Sour flame
I'm a slave to my mind
You give me something to believe in
"I've got you written in a black book by the railroad track. You see, I know your fate."
(Ooh)
And I said, "you've got to listen, I'm a songbird with a brand new track. You underestimate."

I'll give you something to believe in
Put out the basement full of demons
Realize you're a slave to your mind, break free
Just give me something to believe in
Just give me...
Just give me something to believe in”

Will has barely touched his dinner. I’ve cooked the fish he caught today and served them with peppers and tomatoes and the obligatory rice. The dish is not enough to entice him away from the cork board mounted to the wall. We are eating in the kitchen, our plates on the prep table, specifically so that we can both see the collage of sketches and documents assembled there. But it is not enough; Will wanders out of his seat and studies the scale drawing of the docked yacht I created based on his nautical observations.

I abandon my plate as well and creep up behind him. He is enraptured by our plans and oblivious to me until I slide my arms around his midsection and rest my chin on his shoulder. He sighs, a restless sound, but angles his head toward me to nuzzle the side of my face for a sweet moment.

“Performance anxiety?” I ask.

Will barks out a laugh, closing his hands over mine. “Is this the part where you say, uh, ‘don’t worry, it happens to every guy at some point’?”

“I can only speak to my own experience.” I kiss his temple. “I was a bundle of nerves that night in Florence, before Il Monstro’s first kill.”

“I can imagine.” I release Will and he acquiesces, returning to his dinner. “And you didn’t have someone there with… experience.”

“All we can do is be as prepared as possible. What happens after is beyond us.” I tap his plate with my fork and he picks up his own, taking a bite. “Tell me about the dogs,” I request. If Will ruminates too much he will overthink. I need him to act on glorious, unbridled instinct. We are each seeking the same zest we felt killing the Dragon together, sacred violence.

“I let Alejandra name them.”

With that simple admission, I understand that Will has accepted that we may have to leave this place not long after our work is done. The dogs will stay with Magdaly.

“Noche, Manteca, and Bebé,” he finishes, then humors me with another bite. “She was pretty mad at me when I told her I was getting Luz fixed. She wants more puppies.”

We share gentle smiles. I am thinking of our decision not to have children. There is a little Alejandra in both of us, despite it all, demanding and petulant even in the face of logic; there can be no more dogs, or Magdaly won’t be able to feed them. And yet.

I wonder if, in the interim after Muskrat Farm, Will had a vasectomy. After what happened with Margot, it would have been prudent. I know he had no plans to impregnate Molly. I resolve to look for the scar next time I'm in the neighborhood.

For no reason at all, the thought saddens me. Perhaps Alejandra and I are more alike than I imagined.

Even the dogs are not enough to distract him for long, and he is back in front of the board. "What if he doesn't send all the girls?"

"He will, for the price." We arranged for the women to board a boat, allegedly hired out to another yacht. The story is that the heir to an oil company, recently engaged, is having his bachelor party.

Instead, Diego will take the women safely ashore, and give them clothes and money and bus tickets to go home if they wish. I had to have my broker in Switzerland sell a painting to afford Will's plan, but I did so without a shred of hesitation. The women's safety is of utmost importance to him.

"And if he doesn't?"

"We will adapt." I rise again and take him in my arms, face to face this time to make him look at me.

"I don't want them to see it." It worries him that the women might be traumatized, more so than they already are. In my mind, they may very well delight in Will's design, if they hate their captors enough.

"We will adapt," I repeat, tilting his chin up with a gentle hand.

Before he lets me kiss him, he asks, "Promise?"

Now he asks, just as I have vowed to bestow fewer promises in order to better keep them. But what can I say? I believe I can safely vow that if our plan goes awry, we will adapt in a way that protects the women. Righteousness in Will comes from defending the innocent; it is a core part of who he is as a killer. I must see value in their safety because he does. This is how I adapt to him, for him, just as he has learned to enjoy the taste of human flesh for me.

And I am a very skilled chef, which made it easier, I'm sure.

I place my hands on his shoulders and give them a reassuring squeeze. It is him who kisses me now, hand on my cheek, the other resting, curved around the back of my neck. Will is suddenly insistent, clutching me, pressing his body into mine with reckless force, backing my hips against the kitchen counter.

Sweet as it is, accepting the needy penetration of his tongue, feeling his hand slide down my chest, searching for my nipple through my shirt, circling it with his thumb, I take him by the hair and pull away. I am gentle at first, then use more force as he resists me. He murmurs a

frustrated curse as I deny him my mouth, nuzzling the side of his face instead, an affectionate but clear reminder of our boundaries.

“I was doing it again, wasn’t I?” he says, resting his head against my acromion. “C-clutching for balance.”

“You were,” I say, stroking his hair in forgiveness. “And a time will come where you’ll be free to come to me for it.”

“After we build the foundation.”

“Yes.” I cup the back of his head and we share a lingering look before he breaks away from me with a sigh. “Eat your dinner,” I insist.

He manages a few more bites on his nervous stomach. We don’t speak much as we clean up after. I know Will is mired in his design and the first-time jitters of a fledgling killer. He’d shot Garret Jacob Hobbs to save Abigail. Randall Tier was glorious combat, kill or be killed. The situation we found ourselves in with the Dragon was Will’s setup, but he had no particular endgame in mind, not really, only that something or someone would end. This time, he has fully embraced premeditation.

He leaves me drying wine glasses, wandering out of the kitchen, eyes cloudy and distant. I let him go and finish my task before searching for him.

Will is in the library, seated at the enormous oak desk. There is a desktop computer here with slow but steady internet access. He’s left the lights off, and the screen lights up his face in a sinister mix of illumination and shadow. Whatever he is watching on the screen has made his expression cold and very, very dangerous. He is so beautiful I feel my heart clasp its hands involuntarily in response.

I linger at the doorway. Softly, I can hear the music and dialog of a video playing. “‘Sup everybody, it’s Alpha Shark comin’ at you with a new video. Today I’m gonna teach you how to get bitches to party on your yacht. Like, nines and tens, my friends. Let’s do this.”

I recognize Hank Lesko’s voice, and the insipid electronica that serves as his YouTube channel’s theme music. Will skips ahead to the sign off with a click of the mouse. “All right, Alpha Shark signing off. Remember, if you’re not an alpha shark, man, you’re just a guppy trying to run with the big dogs. Peace!”

“That mixed metaphor is worse every time,” I say from my place in the doorway, shoulder leaning on the molding.

“Everything is worse every time.” Will’s voice is glacial, and it echoes threateningly in the dark.

“It seems to me the digital world will be a better place after tonight.” I come around behind him and put a hand on his shoulder, leaning past him to switch off the computer. I kiss his neck, then his cheek. “Shall we?”

“Yes,” he says. No hesitation.

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Will is delectable in all black. The thin shirt hugs his chest tightly enough that I can easily see the definition of his deltoids and pectorals as he rows. We took the small boat as far as we could, but now Will has cut the motor and we are paddling, the current aiding us.

There are a few lights on, but the Leskos’ yacht is otherwise quiet. As we near the back of the boat, scanning the decks for any sign of movement, Will steps off and secures us near the motor in the back. Together, we climb up and over the railing to the lower deck, which is a mess of plastic cups and patio furniture. We find our way to the master stateroom. I have the syringe ready. Will nods and I slip inside to administer a sedative to young Mr. Lesko. He wakes as the needle goes in, but I have injected him before he can get up. I put my gloved hand over his mouth and shush him until he drifts off again beneath his ridiculous tiger-print sheets.

I rejoin Will in the hall. Together we creep out onto the front deck. A phantasmal mist rises from the built-in Jacuzzi, lit from within by a pale green light. Hank Lesko’s bodyguards are talking and smoking against the far railing, facing the Lesko mansion. One of them has a gun in a holster over his black tee-shirt. The other appears to be unarmed. We cannot allow a shot to go off, or Will cannot complete his design.

We step out of our shoes and draw our knives. Will’s eyes are alight, practically glowing with the same eerie iridescence as the pool. I force myself to focus on our task and not fall into admiring how gorgeous he is like this, fixated entirely on murder. We stalk out into the open. The space between the interior hall of the deck and the railing seems endless. We take our time. We make no sound.

However, as I told Will back home, one cannot plan for everything. The man with the gun tosses his cigar butt into the water and turns. Luckily, we are within a few steps of our targets. Will pounces on him and catches his wrist before he can draw, slicing the knife across his throat. They fall together on the deck. That leaves me to face the other man, who opens his mouth to shout. I stab him beneath the sternum, angling up and bisecting his heart, using my weight to pin him to the railing, my hand over his mouth.

His dark eyes are wide and terrified, confused, pleading with me. I stare into them as they begin to fade, until I hear Will’s muffled grunt of pain.

I turn to see Will pinned under the larger guard, who has his hands around Will’s throat. The knife wound across his neck was only deep enough, it seems, to sever the vocal cords and cause some bleeding. Will’s hands cling to the guard’s wrists, trying to force him away. The gun and Will’s knife lay out of reach.

My victim gurgles his last breath. I could drop him now and assist. But I wait. I have great faith in Will. I always have.

Will’s lips, spattered with the man’s blood, draw back in a snarl. He ceases defending himself and instead jabs his thumbs into the man’s eyes. The guard tries to scream, but the laceration

on his throat only bleeds harder, smearing Will all in crimson where his skin is exposed. The guard rears back to tear Will's hands from his face. Will lets go and he falls back on the deck. Will is on his feet in a moment, lifting the man by his hair and the gun holster. I watch him haul the victim roughly up and smash his face into the metal railing, then toss him with apparent ease onto the deck near the Jacuzzi.

If Will isn't careful, he's going to alert the security at the mansion. I am aware of this, but I make no move to warn him. I would not stop what has begun for any treasure the world has to offer. My victim is dead, so I drop him onto the deck, looking at Will, not the body that crumples at my feet.

Will hauls the writhing man a few feet further on the deck, then grapples him again, perching on his abdomen, pinning him down. He ignores the man's flailing hands, and takes a few glancing blows to his face as he forces his victim's head back into the bubbling whirlpool.

I watch, bursting with pride, as Will drowns his victim, the cords in his neck standing out, his shirt soaked with sweat and blood and clinging to every dangerous curve, the cuts of his forearms deep and sinewy. His hair is wild but his eyes are pure and calculating. He makes no sound, and his breaths are slow and even.

I remember how I tricked Jack into thinking he'd strangled me. I am moments away from warning Will about this when Will draws another knife from a sheath strapped to his ankle and stabs it savagely into his victim's throat, opening it up in a fount of blood. The jacuzzi is full of it, the bubbling water red with pink froth. The body shudders once, then goes limp.

Will slowly releases it and gets to his feet, the knife clattering to the deck below. Now he pants and wipes his forehead, leaving an even larger smear of blood there. It is black in the moonlight.

"Will." I can only breathe his name. I feel as though my love will shatter me. I cannot contain it.

He turns to me and there is a flicker of recognition in his eyes that grows into a spark, then a flame. He smiles.

"It's beautiful," he says.

" *You* are beautiful," I correct him.

And just like that, he is in my arms, sticky with drying blood, musky with sweat and death. It mingles with the last traces of cologne on his neck and his natural scent and I am left senseless beneath the stars, holding him, kissing his hair, his forehead, blood-smeared cheeks, his hot, wet mouth, feeling the press and pulse of his tongue. His hands – his murder weapons – grasp handfuls of my shirt and my hair and twist to the point of pain. I break off to kiss his neck until I find the little hollow beneath his collarbone, yanking the neckline of the shirt out of my way. And I lay my mark, biting and sucking his flesh until it is livid and bruised. He exhales sharply and draws in air, perhaps to moan.

I put my hand over his mouth even as I kiss back up to it, trading my fingers for my lips. “Sssh,” I whisper against him.

Will pants, trembling with desire, curses.

This is only the beginning of Will’s design.

Our design.

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We are lit by the ghostly pre-dawn, standing together on the upper deck. Will has brought the yacht to a stop a few miles from shore. He is shirtless now, his torso drenched in blood from chumming the waters with the remains of the guards. I have finished packing the cooler and my surgical tools, and removed what evidence we may have left behind.

I draw a cold bottle of water from the cooler now, from where it was nestled on ice next to the pieces of arm, leg, liver, and half-rack of ribs, all wrapped carefully in plastic. Cracking it open, I offer it to Will, who takes a long drink before passing it back to me.

I glance at my watch. “Any time now,” I assure him, brushing a lock of hair behind his ear. It is stiff with blood and sweat.

As if on cue, Hank Lesko stumbles out onto the deck in his shorts, sobbing, clutching the bandaged stump where his right arm once was. Will lifts Hank’s cellular phone and begins recording a video, zooming in on Hank as he discovers the bodies of his friends. He vomits at the sight of the man with his head still submerged in the bloody pool full of brackish foam. “Oh God oh God oh God oh God…” he chants.

I do not watch him. I watch Will watch him. Will’s expression is detached and cool, but his eyes glimmer, jagged aquamarine and onyx.

Hank at last examines his surroundings. The ocean is vast and lonely, the stars disappearing one by one overhead as the sun rises.

Will stops the video, then presses the upload button before handing the phone to me. He puts on a fresh pair of latex gloves.

I accept the device and slide it in my pocket, letting my face ask the question.

“No, I got it.” Will leans in and kisses just my lower lip, working it between his own for a long, slow suck that tastes of copper sweetness. I had managed to curb my arousal as we hacked the guard’s bodies apart after I claimed the organs I wanted, but it returns with a roar that leaves me breathless.

“Just say the word,” I call after him as he descends the stairs to the lower deck. He smiles over his shoulder at me.

I watch as he approaches Hank Lesko, who has collapsed on a lounge seat, panting, with his head dipped toward his knees, rocking and blubbering.

“Hank,” Will says, smooth, conversational.

Hank’s head shoots up and his face works in recognition. “W-what- what the fuck are you doing here – what happened? W-w-w-what the *fuck* is going on, man? Somebody took my arm, man, look at this!”

“That was Dr. Jakov,” Will explains patiently. “That’s the only part of you we’re keeping.”

Hank’s eyes climb over Will’s shirtless, bloodstained body, not as mine do in appreciative lust, but in pure terror. “...you…” He scrambles to his feet and tries to run, but is still undoubtedly woozy from the sedatives I gave him. He trips and falls, cannot catch himself on one arm. Will takes him by his remaining limb and hauls him up, putting him in a headlock. I am burning with desire now, watching his taut body as he forces his victim over to the winch at the prow, where he has readied a life vest. Hank elbows Will in the face, dropping him back momentarily, but Will reclaims his hold and begins to squeeze, cutting off blood and oxygen to Hank Lesko’s brain. The cells there are no doubt asphyxiating, but this is no great loss, as there was not much to his brain to begin with.

This subdues him enough for Will to drop him onto the deck and grapple him into the life vest. It is only one arm, after all. He cinches it tight, the rope already attached to the nearby winch, and uses it to haul Hank to his feet, leaning him over the side of the boat.

The water around the yacht is a mass of silvery fins. We have been chumming the waters with human blood and flesh for hours, and called forth every shark in a hundred-mile radius. Will taught me to identify each species – bull shark, tiger shark, black-tip, hammerhead, reef shark. He tells me how Fidel Castro was an avid marlin fisherman and helped establish marine wildlife reserves on the Cuban coast after meeting Jacques Cousteau. He’s been studying feeding patterns and piloted the boat along currents and lanes that would attract the largest number of fish as well as a diverse array of species. They are hungriest just before sunrise.

Hank screams. It echoes out over the placid dawn, a sharp, precise sound, a perfect note from an instrument. Will is the conductor of this composition we wrote together.

He dumps Hank overboard even as the younger man struggles and squeals and shrieks. The life jacket catches him and the rope goes taut, suspending him over the side of the boat above the churning water.

Hank is pleading for his life, screaming and sobbing and begging. Will doesn’t acknowledge the display. Instead, he picks up a severed hand from the deck, shows it to Hank over the side of the boat, then drops it into the water at Hank’s feet so he can see the sharks snap it up and tear it apart.

This is my cue. I follow Will down to the lower deck and bring him the phone. He bites off his glove to use the touch screen. “Try over here,” I advise, steering his bare shoulders until

he's a little way down the railing, angling the shot to catch the entirety of Hank's flailing body and the sharks in the water below.

"That's perfect. Ready when you are." Will opens an application on the phone and begins a live stream onto Alpha Shark's YouTube channel, careful to keep the winch out of frame. He steadies his elbows against the bloodstained railing, then nods to me.

I operate the winch as Will taught me. Slowly, so slowly, just a few inches at a time, I lower Henry Ford Lesko into the ocean.

At first, the sharks are wary of his legs as he kicks and shrieks and begs and prays. But there are so many in the water, he cannot help but cut his foot against an errant tooth. Once the fresh blood hits the sea, the fish shuffle loose their shyness. The first to bite is a bull shark, sinking its teeth into Henry's foot and swimming away with some of his toes. That is how it goes – a shark takes a mouthful and quickly swims away to devour its prize, smaller fish swarming its jaw to get a mouthful of scraps.

Hank Lesko screams himself hoarse, his eyes rolling up into his head as sharks attach their mouths to his calf muscles and begin to tear them, whipping their bodies from side to side, shaking and spinning him, splattering the side of the yacht with blood. He is going into shock. The water around him is soaked crimson.

I lower him until the water meets the bottom of the life vest. The ocean churns with sharks and scavenger fish. The air is alive with sea birds diving to capture morsels for themselves, confident that the sharks are more interested in the frenzy than in them.

The yacht has satellite service, and the video of Hank Lesko's death flows in an invisible bloody stream up past the clouds, to the stars, and then is beamed back down to earth in its grisly glory. Will continues to film as our victim goes entirely limp, his head lolling forward, skin ashen with blood loss. He nods to me and I release the winch entirely, dropping the half-eaten body into the water for the sharks to finish.

Only then does Will end the livestream. He takes the phone apart and crushes the components before throwing everything overboard.

I gather our things into the small boat we brought. Will moves the yacht out of reach of the frenzy, then cuts the engine. We board our small craft after a final wipe-down and Will unmoors us before starting the engine.

We speed for a cove not far from our private beach, hoping not to encounter any other craft in our current state – covered in blood and transporting human remains. We spot a fishing boat, but Will thinks it is too far away for the crew to have seen much of anything.

Cutting the motor, Will uses the last of the momentum to guide us ashore before stepping into the surf to pull the craft up on the sand with a few expert moves. I disembark and retrieve the bag we stashed in the jungle's undergrowth.

On the white sand, in the full power of the now-risen sun, I devour the sight of Will as he is now, shirtless, smeared with blood, hair a mess. He drops his soaked shoes on the pile of

evidence I've started – three knives, my shoes, and his discarded shirt. Will steps into the surf. The waves are stronger here, and they crash against his legs, soaking him to his knees and spraying a layer of moisture across his abdomen that glistens in the early morning sunlight.

And I have reached my limit. I do not realize it until I find myself grappling Will from behind and pinning him to the sand just at the waterline. There is no surprise in his expression, or what I catch of his expression before I bury my lips against his, tasting the salt of blood and ocean. He wraps his arms around my neck and pivots with his new strength, rolling me onto my back, soaking me in the waves as they come up to kiss the shoreline just as Will kisses me now, in passionate, furious bursts. In between, we gaze into each other's eyes, our hands roaming, his fingers in my hair, mine in his, then curling around the rise of his backside and groping it at long last. It is as rounded and perfect as I suspected it would be, supple and firm with muscle.

Will gets on his knees to help me yank my soaked shirt over my head and toss it in the evidence pile. Then he is on me again, devouring my lips, curling his fingers through my chest hair, thumbing my nipple, circling it until it stands even higher. Then he drops his head and sucks on it, grazing it with his teeth, murmuring endearing little sounds of appreciation before I pull his head away by the hair and flip him under me again.

I drag the wet muscle of my tongue over his cheekbone, collecting the tacky sheen of blood against its textured surface. He arches his back and inhales, pushing against me, but he is not the only one who has been preparing physically for this day. My body is strong from fighting ocean currents and my own fatigue, swimming until I've nearly drowned. When I have him flat like this, my hips against his, I can still hold him; I am just enough broader and taller.

The sand beneath us is wet and thick but shifts enough that Will tries to burrow down to get free. He nearly does, too, and I have to give his sharp senses credit where it is due. But there will be none of that, not now. I splay out over him, pinning him as the waves wash in and out, and hold his arms against the sand. We are both wet and hard to grip; my fingers grind sand against the tender flesh of his wrists.

He resists me, driving his heels into the beach for leverage, until I bury my face in his neck, kiss his throat, tongue the hollow where the clavicles meet, tasting the divine salt of blood and sweat and ocean in the little crevice there, a holy trinity. Will moans now, his sighs and shuddered exhalations giving over to unfettered sounds that plead his desire. He gives in and stops trying to get out from under me, content where I have trapped him, tipping his head back and offering me the expanse of throat. I drop my open mouth against it a few inches down from his earlobe and mark him again. He ruts up against me and I can feel, at long last, the outline of his desire against mine.

I cannot stop kissing him. In between breaths I whisper half-formed words in English, French, Italian, Lithuanian, my tongue senseless, mad with lust, yes, but also my love for him. This must be what insanity feels like. All of existence is Will; the taste of his mouth, his body beneath mine, the litany of his quivering breaths and sighs, his delectable moans.

He balls his hands into fists above where I grip his wrists, then relaxes and splays his fingers before lifting his elbows and arching his back. I do not think he is going to try and get out

from under me, so I loosen my grip. All he wants is to work his fingers into my damp hair and squeeze my backside as ardently as I enjoyed his earlier.

I trail my tongue down from his chin, over the gentle ride of his laryngeal prominence, then drop my mouth over his nipple, sliding one arm between the bow of his back and the sand. He inhales sharply and lets his air out between his parted lips in a deep sigh of appreciation as I bite, then flick my tongue, then bite again.

There is no stopping this and we have embraced it as we embrace each other. I roll to the side just enough to kiss his blood-smeared belly while I hurry his belt buckle open. He helps me push the black pants down, lifting his hips to let me yank down his underwear.

At last. I have not left my senses so far behind that I waste the opportunity to revel in this moment, taking in a sight I have sorely missed; Will's full magnificence, filled in its entirety and beading at the tip for me. That is a pearl I cannot resist and I lick it delicately and savor the taste. At the slight touch of my tongue to the head, a shudder passes through his body and his hips rise from the sand. He doesn't plead, or order; he trusts, and I give, grasping the sharp cut of his hip. He takes my other hand and holds it over his heart, gasping in a grateful breath as I draw him in as far as I can. His taste is both sacred and profane and I worship him, moving up and down his shaft, undulating my tongue along his sensitive underside. His breath catches and his free hand digs desperately into the sand, his other crushing my palm against his sternum. He knows better than to try and warn me he is close. He knows, from experience or instinct, that I want to consume his emission.

He orgasms just as a larger wave washes over us; the tide is shifting. I unclasp my clothing with amorous haste even as he lays panting on the shore. My arousal is complete and straining and almost to the point of pain; I bend up his leg and create a valley between his groin and his thigh; inelegant, but effective. A few thrusts and I spill on his bloodstained abdomen, up past his navel and nearly to his collarbone.

I crumple over him, breathing heavily, embracing him with the last of my strength. He clings to me as I roll onto my back and burrows into my arms.

"I love you," he breathes into my ear, then kisses me, a long, sweet press of his mouth over mine.

"Will…" is all I can manage.

We lay on the shoreline like this as the sun grows steadily stronger, the day heating up around us. The tide comes in and at last we rise, laughing at our shaky legs and half-stumbling feet, only to fall again in a damp tangle. I help Will strip entirely and he helps me in turn; we toss the clothes on the evidence pile and wade out into the ocean to clean ourselves as we can.

Now if someone happens along, we are indecently exposed but not obvious murderers. A naked swim never hurt anyone.

There are simple clothes stashed in the bag, and we put these on, then fill the bag with our evidence and as many rocks as we can find. Back on the boat, we sink the bag at sea and, at last, return home to our dock.

Will smiles through his obvious exhaustion. He tells me Magdaly took care of the dogs this morning, so I lead him past his house and up to mine, where we undress again and take a proper shower. My marks stand out on his neck and chest, beautifully livid, blood red and violet. *Mine* . We kiss, but are too spent for much more, though I thoroughly enjoy lathering him from neck to feet and especially running a gentle hand into his crevice. He shivers at the touch, but I leave it at that.

It takes some time for us to brush the blood from beneath our fingernails. I find a splash of crimson behind his ear and he helps me with a stubborn one on the back of my neck.

I wrap him in one of my lightweight bathrobes and offer him a spare room.

He kisses me instead, a hand on my cheek. “Can I stay with you?”

How can I refuse? He slides between the sheets and reaches for me. “I will join you when I can,” I explain, though I am fighting weariness and instinct both.

Will raises a questioning eyebrow.

“Someone has to see to the meat,” I remind him.

I finish an hour later, having cleaned, sliced, and stored the meat based on how I plan to prepare it. I place one of the guards’ livers on a plate, cover it with clear wrap and slide it in the refrigerator for later today.

When I creep back to my bed, Will is sound asleep, the robe hanging from the nearby chair. He is tangled in the sheet like a figure in a renaissance painting. He looks younger when he is unconscious; it has always been this way. I undress as well and slide in next to him, spooning against the cool, supple stretch of his body. His hair is damp and tangled but clean and sweet-smelling.

Will shifts in his sleep, curling against me.

I fight slumber, though my body demands it in no uncertain terms. I don’t want to sleep. I want this day, this moment, forever.

I succumb while thinking of paté recipes.

Season 4 Episode 7: Regla de Ocha

Chapter Summary

There's a snake in the music room. Will employs his wranglin' skills, and Hannibal is grateful. Champagne to celebrate a successful snake removal...?

Chapter Notes

Companion song: “American Money” by BØRNS

I was there when you fell from the clouds
And landed in the desert
There was a thunder inside of my heart
There was a wonderful pleasure
And like a stallion racing the rain
You rode on the back of my bike
I knew from the song that you sang
You were my lover for life
Oh, there's no time to sleep
Oh, living in a dream
So take me to the paradise
It's in your eyes
Green like American money
You taste just right
Sweet like Tennessee honey
And we can run away
Swimming in the sunlight everyday
Paradise, it's in your eyes
Green like american money
So we took to the Calico road
Running from the weather
There was a highway inside of her eyes
There was a buried treasure
And we got caught in the storm
You started flying a kite
At the end was the key to my heart
You were my lover for life
Oh, there's no time to sleep
Oh, living in a dream…
We carved our love in the mountainside
We soaked our hearts in the rain
And I waited my whole life for you…”

“It’s beautiful,” Will murmured, looking at the blood on his hands.

“You are beautiful,” Hannibal corrected him.

Will smiled, shyly at first, then wider, showing teeth. Hannibal reached for him and Will fell willingly into the embrace, the kiss.

“I see you,” Will whispered against Hannibal’s neck. “And I see myself.”

“Look, Will.” Hannibal pulled away and pointed to the sea. From the frenzy of silver fins and roiling water rose the stag, its feather-fur wet and shimmering iridescently, the black-rainbow of an oil slick. Its eyes were red instead of flat charcoal, and trapped in the tines of its antlers were strips of Hank Lesko’s flesh. The beast was twice the size that Will remembered, its rack nightmarishly huge. It had shark’s teeth in its snarling mouth.

The stag walked on the water towards them before rearing against the glowing horizon. It was radiant, a perfect specimen, muscles rippling beneath its velvety coat.

“Magnificent, isn’t he?” Hannibal’s voice was low, a reverent rumble.

There was only one sight that could tear Will’s attention from such a rare, mythic beauty. He turned away to look at Hannibal, and reached out to tilt Hannibal’s face back his way. Will ran his thumb along Hannibal’s bottom lip, then cupped his cheek, fingers splayed back in his hair. “I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with you.”

Hannibal bent his neck just so to kiss Will’s parted lips. “I know,” he said.

Will opened his eyes. It was just after sunrise. His internal clock seemed to know when it was time, just as it had in Wolf Trap when he was feeding the dogs on a regular schedule. Normally, he didn’t have any desire to go back to sleep; the day was fresh, the morning cool, and Luz and the puppies needed him. This morning, however, he closed his eyes and tried his damnedest. Anything to get back to that dream.

It didn’t work; Will was disappointed but not devastated. There was a good chance he would have the vision again tonight.

He didn’t dream about his mother anymore. Now he dreamed of bloody waves and slashing fins, of the stag and of Hannibal.

After making his bed, Will stepped into a pair of lightweight pajama pants and a sleeveless undershirt. One glance out the front window confirmed his suspicion that Alejandra was already there, waiting on the veranda. It was Sunday; normally, she had to wait until after school to see the puppies, but on weekends she could spend as much time with them as she wished.

“ *Buenas dias* ,” he greeted as he pulled the door open. The girl tossed a bundle of fresh towels and rags into his arms and ignored the greeting, making a beeline for the nest where the pups were toddling around on unsteady legs. She plopped down on the floor and lifted one into her lap, cooing and giggling as it snuggled against her narrow abdomen.

Luz climbed out of the nest and came into the kitchen to sit with Will while he cooked her breakfast and made coffee. He smiled down at her as he stirred. “Guess we know where we stand,” he said and Luz seemed to agree, dropping her head on her paws. “Though I bet you’re, uh… grateful for the break, aren’t you, girl?”

Will had his coffee and supervised Alejandra as she played with the puppies, then had her change out the nest bedding. “When will they eat food?” she wanted to know as Luz settled in to let the pups nurse.

“You sure you wanna know? It’s, uh… gross.”

“Gross?” she wrinkled her nose. “Like disgusting?”

“Yeah. Luz will eat, then vomit it up and let the puppies try it.”

“Ugh!” Alejandra slapped her hands over her mouth in an exaggerated gesture of disgust, pretending to wretch herself.

“Told you. Bet you’re glad you’re not a dog, huh?”

She shrugged. There was still plenty to like about being a dog; Will considered it often himself.

“When can I come back?” she asked as he hustled her out the door.

“Later. Give them a rest. They’re still pretty little.”

She rolled her eyes and groaned, but trotted off dutifully, headed back to the cottage.

Will changed and stepped out the door to go to the gym. He sighed as Alejandra came bounding back up the path and into the garden. “Alejandra, it’s too soon—“

“I know,” she sassed. “Mama told me to tell you El Doctor says there is a snake in the music room.”

Will laughed incredulously. “What? What kind of snake?”

“ *No lo vi* ,” she said and skipped away.

Will wasn’t sure what to make of that just yet. He went to the gym instead of thinking about it further.

When he returned to the cabana house to shower, Magdaly and the baby were there on the veranda’s rocking chair. The baby was napping and Magdaly had her eyes closed as well, humming as she rocked. When he neared, she looked at him expectantly.

“Snake in the house?” he asked softly, mindful of the child.

She nodded. “El Doctor wanted me to call an exterminator.”

Will scoffed a soft laugh. There wasn’t a snake exterminator on an island this small. He knew from his time living in Louisiana and Mississippi that folks had to wrangle their own snakes. “I’ll take care of it,” he promised.

She nodded like she’d known that was what he would say.

When Will got dressed, he put on the heaviest pair of pants he could find, the utilitarian, nondescript shoes he’d worn the night of Hank Lesko’s murder, and a long-sleeved shirt with the cuffs buttoned. The clothing wasn’t enough to stop a determined snake’s direct bite, but could offer a little protection. When he came back out, Magdaly and the baby were gone. Alejandra, he noted with a considerable level of relief, was nowhere in sight. The last thing he needed was a curious kid getting underfoot.

In her place on the chair, however, Magdaly had left him a gift – a machete in a battered sheath.

Will left the garden and headed into the undergrowth at the edge of the compound. Within thirty feet, he was in dense jungle. Keeping an eye out for scorpions, he found a suitable tree branch and used the blade to cut it down and trim it into a cane-length pole with a deep y-shaped fork at the end.

Nothing left to do but get the job done.

Will eased the door to the music room open. It was shaded from the afternoon sun, full of dusky shadow. He laughed; it echoed against the purposeful acoustics. Here he was, creeping around like he was going to have to search high and low for this thing, never knowing when it would pop out; and there *it* was, curled up in the only patch of sunlight on the floor by the window.

It was big, though.

Will approached with soft steps. The snake was coiled, head resting on its bundled body. Its scales ranged from a toasted tan to a deep chestnut, its coloration forming a broken pattern of chevrons. Will could tell immediately by the head shape that it was some species of boa constrictor. Good news. Not poisonous. And actually a really nice specimen, its scales glowing, healthy and lustrous in the bit of sun it managed to capture.

While boas weren’t poisonous, they had nasty teeth, and Will preferred not to be bitten. He kept his movements slow, reaching out with the stick and lifting the snake about a third of the way down its body – rough estimate since it was coiled. Angling the stick, he was able to raise it and move the head away from himself, stretching the snake out with its tail still on the floor. He then reached out and gently lifted it, supporting it with one hand and the stick.

The snake absolutely did not give a shit about what Will was doing. It watched him with its onyx eye and flicked its tongue a couple of times, but it must have eaten recently enough that

it was lethargic and unbothered by being manhandled out the front door, wrapping once around his arm almost as an afterthought. Will brought it to the edge of the property and gently set it on the ground.

The snake didn't move.

"Go on, git." Will poked it with the stick. "G'on. Get outta here."

It took some more prodding, but eventually the boa became annoyed and slid off into the undergrowth.

Will laughed under his breath. "Saved him from the savage beast."

Cross that chore off the list. Might as well fix a few of the first floor shutters. Some of them had loose hinges, and hurricane season would be there before they knew it.

He worked until his body demanded a break. Water, another cool shower, and clean clothes. Hannibal would be home soon.

Sure enough, he found Hannibal in the foyer of the mansion, examining the trimmed branch Will had left in the hallway, turning it over in his long fingers.

"Tell me, Will — I can see you made this and left it for me to find, but I'm afraid I don't understand what it's for."

"This," Will said, taking it from him by the handle and gesturing with the forked end, "is our snake wranglin' stick. I, uh, field tested it. Perfect design. So we should… keep it *handy* . Maybe in the umbrella stand." He gave it back. Hannibal accepted it with a warm smile, fingering the places where Will had trimmed the smaller branches and smoothed down the knots. He did as Will suggested, sliding it into the gold-leaf umbrella stand by the door. It was humble and rustic in comparison to its surroundings, but stood proud next to the sleek black umbrellas with their curved handles.

Will slid open the pocket doors to the music room. "Surprise. Snake-free."

Hannibal pulled Will into his arms with a charmed little smile.

"Didn't you call me a mongoose once?" It wasn't a real question. Will remembered perfectly.

How do you see me?

The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.

"I did," Hannibal confirmed, letting himself palm the place just above the curve of Will's backside, not a grope, but damn close. Will rested his hand against Hannibal's chest, feeling the gentle texture of his linen vest. The other stole up to stroke the back of Hannibal's neck before curling around the side of his jaw. "Our first breakfast together. After you'd so rudely fled my bed that first night."

“I was scared,” Will admitted. “Not for the right reasons, though.” He paused. “First time eating human flesh?”

Hannibal nodded.

Will sighed and rested his forehead against Hannibal’s shoulder as Hannibal pulled him closer. “I won’t deceive you like that again,” Hannibal said after a time, the words whispered against Will’s hair. “I want you to see me. That means, of course, that I must reveal myself.”

“That, uhm… sounds pretty scary, too, huh.”

Hannibal pulled back to look at him, his expression soft, dark eyes earnest and vulnerable. “Perceptive.”

Will laced his arms around Hannibal’s neck and leaned into him. Hannibal supported his weight and grasped him by the small of the back. “Got any other snakes that need wrangling?” he asked just before the kiss and was rewarded when Hannibal chuckled through it.

“Are you going to use your stick?”

“Depends on the size of the snake.” Will kissed him again, lingering on the lower lip.

Hannibal pressed his face into Will’s neck and inhaled, then let him go with a sigh that was nearly inaudible but communicated a longing Will could definitely relate to.

“Next time you’re in town,” Will said, stepping back and resting a hand on his hip, “we need a terrarium. A big one. Heat lamp, water dish…”

Hannibal’s face betrayed only mild surprise. “Will…”

“His name is Kevin and he’s part of the family now.” Will waited a beat and let Hannibal suffer silently for a moment before admitting, “I’m just messing with you. I let him go. Boas eat all kinds of rodents and stuff. We want him around, just not… in the house.”

Hannibal stepped close again and put his hand on the side of Will’s neck where it met the shoulder. “You’re in a playful mood.”

Will smiled, grazing his teeth over his lower lip for half a second. “I guess I’m just… happy.”

The word was simple, childish, inelegant, but it felt like a revelation. Hannibal’s controlled facade crumbled and he reached for Will’s hand, sliding their fingers together, palms united. “So am I.”

Will leaned into him again, the kiss polite at first, though it grew steadily more reckless. Hannibal let Will push him against the wall, their hands still clasped, and exhaled a gentle, yearning breath when Will left his mouth to kiss his neck until he was stopped by the collar and tie. They hadn’t had sex since the murder, resuming their slow courtship. Will had to assume it was as torturous for Hannibal as it was for him. The waiting was even more difficult now that he had a solid reminder of what was possible.

Hannibal slid a hand into his hair to tilt his head back and kiss him again, tenderly, but with a clear message; they needed to restrain themselves. “We should celebrate,” he said. “Another beast vanquished. Champagne, I think.”

Will stepped back reluctantly, but found himself smiling, regardless. “It really wasn’t a big deal. Don’t tell me you were actually afraid of him.”

“No, but I was not interested in being bitten.” He thumbed Will’s bottom lip, just a touch. “By a snake,” he added. Someone else was feeling playful as well, it seemed.

“Might’ve ruined your jacket.”

“Indeed. May I call on you in an hour or so?”

So formal, like something out of Masterpiece Theater. “Yeah, sure.”

“Until then.” Hannibal left him and went upstairs. Will just stood with his arms crossed and watched him go. Nice view.

Alejandra was waiting for him, tapping her foot, one hip jutting out impatiently. He let her in to have her afternoon visit and took Luz out for a quick walk. By the time he had the dogs taken care of and Alejandra shooed back home, Hannibal was at the door with a champagne bucket, two glasses, and a basket on his arm that turned out to contain paté and French bread sliced and arranged on a plate. He’d changed clothes — of course he had— now wearing a periwinkle shirt and a double breasted linen jacket in camel. Hannibal served on the small glass-topped table on the deck, insisting Will relax on a lounge while he readied a smaller plate and a flute of pale golden bubbles.

“Where’d you find baguette? Somewhere in Havana?” Will rested the plate on the wide arm of the lounge and sipped his drink.

“I baked it this morning before I left.” Hannibal settled onto the lounge next to him and spread paté on a slice.

“Early bird gets the bread.”

Hannibal finished chewing to say, “One only needs to be the early bird’s friend.”

Will shot him a look without meaning to. He just hated that fucking word when Hannibal was concerned.

Hannibal must have realized his error and corrected himself. “Beloved,” he said softly.

“That’s better.”

“It is, isn’t it.” Hannibal watched Will closely as he spread a thick layer of the pulverized liver on a piece of bread and ate it in a few quick bites. “What do you think of this batch?”

“Mmm.” Will answered by eating another piece. After clearing his tongue, he said, “Red wine?”

“This variation has red wine, yes.”

“And just a little… dijon mustard.”

“Very good, Will.” Hannibal lifted his glass and tapped it against Will’s. “Thank you,” he said, “for your help today.”

“I like doing things for you.” After Will said it, he chose to look off at the place where the sea folded into the sky instead of making eye contact. Blushing. Damn it. “Not that there’s, uh… much that you… need… most of the time.”

“True, I could have hired someone to fix the shutters and the door, to catch the snake,” Hannibal lifted the champagne bottle from the ice bucket that sat on the deck between them and topped Will off. “But knowing you chose the tasks brings a sense of connection that can be found nowhere else.” He sipped. “Rare. Beautiful. Can’t be bought.”

“Hmm.” Will cast his gaze away again shyly, taking in the early stages of the sunset. “I’d like to, uh, ungracefully change the subject.”

“By all means.” Hannibal refilled his own flute.

“You saw Richard Lesko today?”

Hannibal nodded, returning his empty plate to the table before settling back in again.

“Did you see… Mrs. Lesko?”

Hannibal’s half-smile was charming, with a hint of knife’s edge cruelty. “I did.”

Will waited. Hannibal only looked at him expectantly. Will shoved another piece of bread in his mouth to buy himself some time.

“It’s been… two weeks. Did, ah… did they…” He polished off another glass to whet his throat. “Say anything about Hank?” he finished at last.

“I’m impressed by your self-control, Will,” Hannibal complimented, watching the little bubbles rise to the top of the flute he grasped by the stem. It was the same color as the sun as it kissed the top of the water. “Nearly a fortnight and you haven’t asked once. Back in Baltimore, I would check *Tattlecrime* every morning hoping for an update.”

Will scoffed gently, mouth twitching at the corner. “Good old Freddie Lounds.” He paused. “Did… she happen to, uh, write anything about…?”

Hannibal’s smile was pleased; benevolent. “Oh yes. It’s all over the news. Not here – the state-run media doesn’t want to advertise our work. But the video was viewed hundreds of thousands of times before it was removed from the website. Even now, there are copies circulating, entire online communities locked in a heated debate over its authenticity.”

“Wait – people think it’s *fake* ?” Will felt a dangerous, icy rage frost over his veins.

“A hoax perpetrated by none other than Hank Lesko himself to boost the popularity of his online presence.”

Will drained his champagne. “I can’t fucking–” He didn’t know how to finish the thought. It felt personal, a thumbed nose at his work, a rebuff of his design.

“Will,” Hannibal comforted, swinging his legs to the side of the lounge and leaning over to put a hand on Will’s arm. “Such is the nature of art. Without a direct dialog with the viewer, we surrender the interpretation.”

“Tell me exactly how someone would… would *fake* that.” Hannibal’s touch was soothing, but unable to combat the next wave of rage that burned molten where it had been icy. “What – CGI? A dummy filled with, ah, sausage links and bags of pig’s blood?”

“These are likely the same people who believe the world is run by lizard folk in the Illuminati.” Hannibal plucked his glass from his hand and refilled it. “In the end, the authorities will have to admit the video is unaltered. You should be proud – the chaos and uncertainty you’ve created is a work of art on its own.”

Will sighed, a harsh exhale, then took a deep breath and a drink. “Sorry. I, uh… overreacted, I guess.”

“Not at all. Your frustration is entirely understandable. I’ve lost count of how many times my work has been misinterpreted.” Hannibal got up to pack up the leftovers and cover the basket with a cloth. “Imagine not having someone else to express that frustration to.”

“Lonesome.”

Hannibal nodded, and held out his hand. Will took it, and let Hannibal guide him to his feet. He put an arm around Will’s shoulders and led him to the deck railing where they could see the uninterrupted expanse of water and the pastel sunset turning gem-toned. “Now, as to your question about the Leskos – they are unsure themselves if the videos are real.”

“They didn’t find the boat?” Will felt seared by disbelief, his grip tightening on the wood of the deck railing.

“No,” Hannibal shook his head. “It seems it was stolen right off the water. Opportunistic, to say the least, considering how much blood there was.”

“It’s almost like someone tipped off these, uh, opportunistic boat thieves.” Will cocked his head and raised an eyebrow.

“That seems plausible.” Hannibal put his glass to his lips and drank. Even as he did so, Will could see the corner of his mouth quirk up.

“No body, no scene, no crime.” Then, “Why didn’t you tell me?” Will traced the rim of his glass with the pad of his finger, watching it go around and around.

“You enjoy doing things for me. It gives me pleasure to do things for you.” Hannibal paused, and set his glass on the railing to take Will’s hand. “The added confusion will set back any

investigation, giving us more time here. Besides that, I thought it would please you to know that Marguerite Lesko holds out hope that Hank will turn up alive – that the video was nothing more than a tasteless joke. This hope will prolong her suffering and make her grief all the more sour when she accepts the truth."

Will didn't speak, just went back to the champagne bucket and poured the last of the bottle in his glass. He stared down into it, seeing not the effervescent bubbles roiling the surface of the liquid but the fins of a hundred sharks.

Hannibal's fingers at his temple, brushing his hair back behind his ear. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

Hannibal's eyes darkened ever so slightly. "Pleased."

Will took a breath and let it out slowly. "You have to know it's… perfect."

Hannibal's chin lifted a half-inch, and Will swore he was puffing up like an animal putting on a mating display.

"But," he added, resting a hand on Hannibal's chest as if to settle him. "You and I do not have the best t-track record for… secrets. And surprises. And, uh, surprise secrets."

For part of a second, Will thought he saw a flicker of anger curl Hannibal's lower lip, but it passed almost as soon as it had registered in his mind. Hannibal looked as though he was about to speak, but instead offered an embrace that was warmly received.

After, he lifted the empty champagne bottle from the melting ice. "Alas, we never drank a toast to Kevin the snake."

"Damn," Will said through a smile.

"Not to worry." Hannibal went back to the basket and lifted the cloth, briefly removing the plate and finding another bottle beneath.

Will laughed. "Always prepared?"

"As often as I can be."

There were several toasts to Kevin the snake as the sun went down, and even one to Freddie Lounds. The second bottle waned but Will had no interest at all in calling it a night, especially with Hannibal feeding him tidbits of information about the media coverage of their murder.

Will perched now on the corner where the deck railings met, feeling loose-lipped and a little too relaxed, watching Hannibal as he leaned against the railing next to him, propped up on his elbows. His hair moved gently in the ocean breeze that signaled the coming night.

Will reached out and tugged at the shoulder of Hannibal's double-breasted jacket. Hannibal turned to face him, straightening his spine. Will grasped at his lapels instead and tried to push

the jacket from his shoulders, even though it was still buttoned. “Take this off,” he complained through a growing smile. “Why does everything have to be so f-formal with you, huh?”

“Clothing protects us — from the elements, from shame, from vulnerability—“

“No,” Will protested, messing with the buttons now. Hannibal responded by sliding his palms against Will’s knees, letting them roam higher in half-inch increments. “N-no, no, no — that might be true for other people but not f-for you. No, I, uh, I don’t think you’re keeping anything out, Hannibal. I think you’re keeping something *in* .”

Hannibal’s hands climbed higher, and Will could feel the distinctive press of each finger—particularly the thumbs. “I think you know,” he said in a low cadence that whispered at a growl. “You’ve seen me with and without my civility.”

“Just take it off. And roll up your goddamn sleeves.” Will got one button on the jacket open and pushed it further back on Hannibal’s broad shoulders.

“Champagne has an interesting effect on you.” Hannibal’s thumbs had nearly met, traversing the seam of Will’s pants that ran along his inner thighs.

“Just like you planned,” Will accused, but he was laughing, even as Hannibal’s hands veered off at the last second, resting on his hips instead.

“Not a plan. A possibility I considered.”

“Two bottles,” Will accused. “Tryna get me drunk.”

“You assume no responsibility.” Hannibal let Will pull him closer, his midsection against the corner of the deck railing, Will’s legs wrapped around it.

Will leaned in to try and kiss him, and closed his eyes. All he received in return was a press of lips on his forehead. He grumbled wordlessly, draping his arms around Hannibal’s neck. “Don’t even,” he warned. “You’re gonna kiss me.”

“I shouldn’t take advantage of your debilitated condition.” Hannibal turned his head to the side as Will tried to kiss him again.

“Debilit– you drank just as much as I did!”

“Then I should be just as easy to manipulate.”

Will slid off the railing and Hannibal had no choice but to catch him, straining a bit in surprise as Will clung to him. Hannibal’s hands cupped Will’s ass to steady him in the hold. “Mutually assured destruction,” Will suggested, pressing his forehead against Hannibal’s, breathing in the combination of cologne and sunset ocean.

“Terms I can accept.” Hannibal kissed him, at last, even as he lowered Will back to his feet. Will squirmed out of his hold and undid the buttons on his jacket even as his lips were busy.

“One of these days,” Hannibal purred as he let Will toss the jacket from his shoulders, “I’m going to button you up in a three piece suit just so I can tear it off of you.”

“I’m holding you to that.” Will caught Hannibal’s chin with his thumb and forefinger to demand the kiss again, harder now, working his tongue in. Hannibal responded, but with a frustrating slowness, only opening up in increments. Will growled softly in his throat and kept at it, pressing himself as tightly against Hannibal as he could, snagging his fingers in his hair. He sucked on Hannibal’s lower lip, then bit it, harder than he probably should have, an impulsive decision.

Hannibal craned his neck, moving his lips out of reach and clamped his hand over Will’s mouth. “It’s early,” he said, nodding toward Magdaly’s cottage where the lights were still on. “The children aren’t asleep yet.”

Will spoke into his hand, but the words were muffled. He switched tactics and massaged his tongue against Hannibal’s palm, a promise of what he could do somewhere else. Again, Will delighted in bearing witness to Hannibal’s slow shift away from civility and control; his triumph was evident when Hannibal let go of his mouth and pressed the pads of his index and middle finger against Will’s lips. Will opened his mouth without hesitation and sucked on his fingers for a few long moments, another reminder of what he could offer.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, removing his fingers and replacing them with his own tongue for a long kiss, deeply penetrating. This metamorphosed into a journey down the side of Will’s neck, where he teased at a bite that never came. Will didn’t realize he was making noise until Hannibal put a hand over his mouth again. He did *not* , however, desist from doing the things that caused Will to make the noises in the first place.

Will reached between them and palmed Hannibal deliberately through his trousers. It was Hannibal’s turn to make a noise loud enough to scandalize the neighbors. “Will-“ he pleaded, or tried to.

“I really can’t wait any more,” Will informed him, feeling Hannibal fill out further in his grasp. “So you better bring me inside before I, ah, make a scene.”

“Discretion, please.” The words were uttered through a kiss, with warmth and humor, as they moved ungracefully for Will’s bed, heading inside to push aside the netting with impatient hands. Will didn’t force Hannibal on the bed under him so much as he collapsed purposely, letting his weight take them down. Hannibal clutched him by the hair and an arm across his back, pulling him as close as possible, and Will delighted at the ease with which Hannibal spread his knees and hooked one leg around Will’s to trap him there.

Will angled his chin down and brought their mouths together again for another long stretch, the kiss in no way chivalrous or tempered by good sense, as so many of their others had been as of late. He was less than gentle when he pulled Hannibal’s hair to tilt his head back and swipe his tongue from the hollow of his throat up to the square of his chin. Hooking his fingers clumsily in the neck of Hannibal’s shirt, he tugged at the top button for a few moments before managing to get it open one-handed. Hannibal let go of him to do his own cuffs, a smugly amused curve to his lips as he watched Will struggle, the other arm occupied

with keeping him upright. “Perhaps your mouth?” Hannibal suggested. “I seem to recall you once making it clear that you didn’t need your hands to open my clothing.”

Will responded by ripping the next button off. It skittered across the tile floor. Hannibal caught his wrist before he could do it again. Will tugged, but he couldn’t get his hand free. His countermove was to kiss and lick the skin he could get to, mostly the rounded top of Hannibal’s left pectoral and the protrusion of his collarbone. When he tested the curve of the clavicle with his teeth, Hannibal tipped his head back and sucked in an audible breath of pain and pleasure. Will backed off with a devious little laugh, nuzzling into Hannibal’s chest hair before resting his cheek on it. “You gonna help me or what?”

Hannibal acquiesced, releasing Will’s hand and sitting up to undo his last buttons, watching in amused silence as Will pulled his own shirt over his head and kicked off his pants. “Your impatience is endearing,” he said, “but it stems from other places in your mind than a simple desire for sexual gratification.”

“Yeah?” Will was incredulous, climbing back onto Hannibal and grinding against him through his trousers, making sure he could feel the very obvious arousal there. “I think *this* says otherwise.”

After another press, Will reared back on his knees and unbuckled Hannibal’s belt and fumbled with the clasp and zipper of the trousers as Hannibal managed to untangle himself from his shirt at last. “All urges to physically intimate aren’t only for sexual release,” Hannibal went on, even as Will tossed his trousers on the floor.

Will crawled up his body and kissed him roughly. “Don’t psychoanalyze me,” he warned, but he couldn’t make it through the rest without smiling. “You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

Hannibal caught Will’s face between his hands and paused just to look at him, lips curled up in a soft expression of adoration. “Patience can be an exercise in torture. But I’m asking you to trust me, Will. The time will come.”

“If the Ripper is killing, you can bet Hannibal Lecter is having a dinner party.” Will rutted against him again through his underwear and Hannibal moaned, gripping him by the shoulder and the hair. The reckless sound made Will grin triumphantly.

“In time. The feast must present itself,” Hannibal assured breathlessly as Will bent to pull off his briefs as he trailed his tongue down from Hannibal’s navel towards his target.

“Got something to, ah, tide me over, I see.” Will lifted Hannibal into his mouth and slid down as far as he could go with an appreciative, “Mmm…” Hannibal arched his back and lifted his chin, pressing the back of his head into the pillow with a strained, pleading sound.

“Your paté’s pretty good,” Will teased, thumbing the slick slit before working his tongue against it. “But this is better.”

“You have — a very nuanced palate, Will—uhn—“ Hannibal’s hand curled around Will’s pillow, the other finding its way into his hair, gentle at first, then twisting as Will increased

the pressure, suction, pace.

“I learned from the best.” Best came out *besh* as Will prematurely returned Hannibal’s cock to its place before he’d finished speaking.

Hannibal sighed again, lifting his hips off the bed for a moment. Then, “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Will couldn’t continue for a few moments. He was laughing too much. Was it him, or was everything funnier after that much champagne?

Or was it *happiness* ? Something so purely simple? It was such a foreign feeling to him that it was difficult to trust. He was in mid-thought when Hannibal flipped him on his back before stripping off the rest of his clothes as well. He slid over Will’s bare body with his own. Will closed his eyes with a smile, running his fingers over the scarred ridges of the Verger brand on Hannibal’s back, feeling the damp heat of his arousal against his thigh, Hannibal’s chest hair slipping over his skin.

As if he was able to read Will’s mind, Hannibal stroked back his hair, slid his hand behind the place where Will’s head met his neck, and asked, “ *Are* you happy, Will? Here, with me.”

“I would’nt’ve said it if it wasn’t true.”

This earned him a kiss, a clear statement disguised as a blatant gesture of lust – Hannibal felt the same way. There was a moment where Hannibal’s hand, large, heavy, warm, closed against Will’s neck; Will could feel it, each finger distinctly, the sensation firing across his nerves. Hannibal’s thumb rested on his pulse even as the kiss continued, ebbing and flowing in intensity. Then, a drawn-out moment of possessive constriction, not hard enough to do much more than make a suggestion. Regardless, it left Will’s heart pulsing in his temples.

His breaths alternated between deep and shallow now as Hannibal’s mouth drifted away from his, rounding the edge of his jaw and inevitably visiting the expanse of his throat. Will felt his toes curling involuntarily at the treatment, the press of lips, the flutter of tongue and promise of teeth. Will put a reflexive hand on the back of Hannibal’s head, entwining it in his hair.

“Did you save room for desert, Will?”

Will went rigid with a sharp inhale as Hannibal bit down on his nipple with the point of an eyetooth before massaging the sting away with his tongue. “Did you?” he panted.

“Always.” Hannibal proved his point by swallowing Will in his entirety with apparent ease.

Half-formed curses and wordless noises made their way between Will’s lips. *So fucking good.* And goddamn, it felt like it’d been *so* long, even though only a week had passed. Will had been fantasizing about it ever since the beach, reliving it several times a day whether it was an opportune moment or not. Hannibal’s mouth was so deliciously warm and wet and perfectly inviting and *fuck* he was good—

Will let out what was essentially a little unselfconscious whine when Hannibal slipped him out of his mouth just before he tensed to climax. “Little— rude, Dr. Lecter—“ Anything else Will planned to say was lost in a sudden moan as Hannibal brought them together in his hand, undersides touching, reunited at last. He moved his hips slowly at first, just a few inches at a time before lengthening the movements and applying more pressure, then speed.

Hannibal’s thighs tensed against Will’s and Will shuddered at the pleasant warmth of his emission as it spread over his belly, shimmering against the scar above his navel. Still breathing hard, a sheen of sweat gathered on his forehead, Hannibal released them both, maneuvering down to draw Will into his mouth again, gripping his thigh with one cruel hand and putting his other tenderly over Will’s heart.

When Will peaked, true to his word, Hannibal swallowed, then sat back, dabbing the edge of his mouth with the back of his index knuckle.

His suggestion of a shower was met initially with a groan, but the room was warm, and wet hair and damp skin would make for cooler sleeping. Will still made it quick, barely drying off before collapsing back on his bed, which Hannibal had stripped down to just the sheets after cleaning himself up. Even though it was too hot for comfortable skin contact, Will still found his place in Hannibal’s arms, tired, his buzz ebbing, replaced with mellow satisfaction.

“May I stay the night, Will?”

Will chuckled against Hannibal’s chest, where his face rested.

“This is your house,” Hannibal reminded him. *Boundaries.* Even if they hadn’t been able to keep their hands off of each other, there were still protocols to follow.

“That depends,” Will said slowly, forcing himself not to smile where Hannibal would feel it against his pectoral. Let him sweat for a second. “You gonna make me breakfast?”

Hannibal’s chest tremored with a few moments of silent laughter. “It is an exercise in restraint not to make you breakfast every morning.”

“Hmm. Okay. Second question.” Will hauled himself up on his elbow and ran the back of his knuckles over Hannibal’s cheek. “You gonna give me some sugar in the morning, or just, ah, cook and run?”

“Sugar and breakfast,” Hannibal confirmed, tilting his head up to kiss Will just as the words left his lips.

“ ‘Kay. Then I, uh, formally request your presence in this bed tonight. Please RSVP.”

“I accept.”

One more kiss, then Will collapsed with, “G’nite, sweetheart.”

Will was inches from sleep when something warm lapped at his hand where it hung over the side of the bed. Luz whined; he’d forgotten to take her out before bed. Well, he’d been a little distracted. “Okay, okay,” he mumbled, reluctantly sliding out of Hannibal’s slumbering lgrip

and getting shakily to his feet. He snagged the thin blanket Hannibal had removed from the bed and folded on a nearby chair, draping it over one shoulder and gathering it clumsily around his waist.

Will opened the front door and stepped out onto the veranda, holding the door for Luz. “C’mon,” he ordered. Luz paused at the threshold. A low growl emanated from her throat as her hackles raised.

The sound and sight of Luz’s instinctual response cleared sleep from the surface of Will’s brain, replacing it with sharp alert, a tingle of anxiety creeping up his spine.

He caught a shadow out of his peripheral vision and turned. There was someone sitting in the rocking chair on the veranda. But it wasn’t Magdaly.

It was Chiyoh.

“Oh, shit,” Will said.

Season 4 Episode 8: Aleyo

Chapter Summary

Chiyoh has arrived in Cuba with news from home. Hannibal realizes he needs Will's nurturing side more than he would like to admit.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Keep On Loving You” – Cigarettes After Sex (cover)

“You should have seen by the look in my eyes, baby
There was somethin' missin'
You should have known by the tone of my voice, maybe
But you didn't listen
You played dead, but you never bled
Instead you laid still in the grass, all coiled up and hissin'
And though I know all about those men
Still I don't remember
'Cause it was us
Baby, way before then, and we're still together
And I meant
Every word I said
When I said that I loved you I meant that I loved you forever
And I'm gonna keep on lovin' you
'Cause it's the only thing I want to do
I don't want to sleep, I just want to keep on lovin' you
And I meant
Every word I said
When I said that I loved you I meant that I loved you forever…”

I watch Will’s hands over his shoulder as he gently mixes the bowl full of salt with the small amount of water I’ve just poured in, creating a damp paste. It is a pretense; I seem to be observing his method, but I am, instead, enjoying the elegant shapes that make up these two beautiful murder weapons: pronounced ligaments and tendons, rounded knuckles, his clean, flat nails, the way his wristwatch lays against his bone structure there. A few grains of salt escape the side of the bowl; Will unthinkingly takes them between his forefinger and thumb and tosses them over his left shoulder to ward off the Devil.

As if I could be deterred.

He pauses his work and glances back at me; his profile is a momentary gem, and I will never get used to the little turn at the tip of his nose. “Old habits. My dad and Aunt Louise always used to do it. Something about how Judas spilled salt at the Last Supper.”

Da Vinci started that rumor, when spilling salt was already seen as an ill omen. I say, “The ancient Romans considered salt a symbol of friendship. Its role as a preservative represents a good relationship’s lasting quality. It was often presented to guests to signify the abiding strength of connection.”

“Hmm.” Will works his hands through the salt again as I turn back to his expertly gutted fish and stuff another with lemon slices, peeled garlic, ginger root, and sprigs of fresh tarragon, thyme, and parsley. “Your relationship with Chiyoh is, uhm… well-salted, I guess,” he says.

“I’ve known her since I was thirteen.”

“Pretty damn well-preserved. Petrified. Fossilized.” Will brings the bowl of damp salt over to the trays I’ve already covered with parchment paper. I can’t decide if he is jealous – not in a romantic sense, but for the vast stretch of time Chiyoh and I have known one another. It is equally possible that Will is dreading this dinner because he suspects what I suspect – Chiyoh is here because we are in danger.

Or, he is less than thrilled to have her as a house-guest because the last time they faced one another, she threw him off of the back of a train. Their final interaction four years ago was for Chiyoh to shoot him through the shoulder when he tried to kill me.

As if he senses my thoughts – which he may very well be able to do with those exquisite neurons of his – he says, “She kissed me.”

It requires every shred of my self-control to continue my cooking preparations and not react on instinct. I finish stuffing the last fish. When I look at him again he is watching me, brow furrowed, eyes demure. Waiting for my response.

I will admit I had not considered that a former tryst was the reason he was anxious about dinner tonight.

“I’m reminded of the night you drove over an hour in a snowstorm to tell me you’d kissed Alana Bloom.” I wash my hands and dry them, then return to the bowl of salt, creating mounds on the parchment paper.

“It wasn’t a clutch for balance,” Will corrects me, dipping his hands in the bowl and creating a salt mound of his own. “It was right before she tossed me off the the train. She wanted to get my back against the railing.”

“Clever girl,” I say, pressing a fish into the mound of salt, and then covering it with more damp crystals until it is entirely sealed.

“If you’re, uh, wondering why I waited until now to say something,” Will mumbles, patting salt over his own fish. “I, ah, didn’t even think about it until she showed up. That’s how little it meant. I’m assuming, to-to either of us.”

“Everything Chiyoh does is in service of my safety,” I say, placing the fish in the oven to bake. “She kissed you as a distraction, to put you off guard and position you as needed.” I wash and dry my hands again. Will isn’t looking at me. He tries to step past me to pick up a bowl to place in the sink; against my better angels, and everything I have worked toward in this new phase of our relationship, I grab one of those pretty little wrists and squeeze, much harder than is necessary. He winces, but he looks at me. “That does not, however, explain why you allowed it to happen.”

Or, I think but do not say, *why you all but propositioned her in Lithuania.* I hadn’t known about that until this afternoon when Chiyoh and I were able to have a long, private conversation. She’d mentioned his offer to ease her loneliness the night he’d stayed in the lodge, but hadn’t told me about the kiss. The two events connect in my mind like a curled string of barbed wire.

He glances away, giving me another eyeful of that disastrously beautiful profile. I focus on the silhouette of his eyelashes before he looks me in the face again. “She felt connected… to you. She was a piece of you. And you were… you’d been so far away.”

My grip on his wrist eases, my thumb moving against the tender skin there in a circular caress.

“She’d known you for so long,” Will continues, unprompted, as I release my hold and cup the side of his face instead. The way he leans into my palm is his apology. “It was a way to have you… w-when I *couldn’t* have you.”

“And now that you *can* have me?”

The edge of his mouth twitches as if he’s suppressing a smile. “I have no interest. And, ah, since she isn’t planning to-to throw me off a train… I hope… she’s not interested, either.”

I open my arms. He folds himself into them, tucking his hands against my chest, elbows in, and rests his head on my shoulder. I cradle the nape of his neck and put my palm on the small of his back. His scent is a comfort where his confession will be as well, once my lower brain has accepted it. Said lower brain pounds against the bars I’ve dropped, demanding to know why he waited until Chiyoh reappeared in our lives to tell me what he’d done. I refuse to acknowledge its protest, its amorphous rage that lashes out at everything, striking blindly. Mentally, I move Will out of its reach while simultaneously holding him closer to my physical body.

“We can talk more about it,” he offers, voice muffled by where his mouth is, angled against my shirt. “I… don’t, uh, want you to think I’m trying – that I want to hide anything.”

But you did. Right up until this inopportune moment.

I force myself to take a breath, to inhale the clean smell of his hair, the cologne I've chosen for him on his skin, the little bit of ocean that seems to hang on him since we arrived in Cuba. Even grounded and centered, I cannot deny myself; I bring one of his palms to my mouth and kiss it, then his lips. It should be sweet, but it is possessive, my hand in his curls, my tongue in his mouth. He makes a little sound, not pleasure so much as acknowledgement. I ignore it for several more moments until my kiss has, in my mind, re-established my presence, negating that long-lost kiss on the train.

It will have to do for now. Dinner is in half an hour.

I've rearranged the table. I will sit at the head, my usual place, with Will on my right and Chiyoh on my left. We will sit at the opposite end from where Bedelia died. I think Will would deem it appropriate. His place at my right hand will send a clear message to Chiyoh as well – Will is mine, to be protected as an extension of me. Something more than *nakama* .

Our first course is shrimp with a sweet pineapple glaze. I bring in the dishes and serve our guest first, then Will, then myself. Will is actively doing his best not to look at Chiyoh while still, I think, being as polite as he can be. It is difficult not to look. She is very different from when we saw her last. Still as beautiful as ever, her posture pristine, age is dressed in a silver one-shouldered gown. Her hair has grown long, and she wears it clasped at the back of her neck with a thin moon-shaped clip. Where once it was a monochrome of black, she now has a sheaf of pale gray growing from her forehead, another from her left temple. It is as if leaving Castle Lecter has allowed time to, at last, catch up with her. As it comes for us all – Will has another touch of gray just above his ear I hadn't noticed until today, and all of the stretching and exercises and swimming in the world won't ever entirely cure my intermittent lower back pain.

It is not age that terrifies me, of course. I sat at my great-grandmother Grazina's feet and listened to her babble her half-remembered stories, never bothered in the slightest. I did not wince at the feel of her papery skin or yellowed nails. It was her indignity that challenged me, her dependence on others for her basic needs.

Love, I think, is much the same way – though not as inevitable as old age, certainly as debilitating.

"Thank you for your hospitality." It is Chiyoh who speaks at last, after finishing two shrimp.

"Family is always welcome," I remind her.

"Do you have the full use of your shoulder?" Chiyoh directs this question at Will.

Will pauses, a shrimp half-way to his mouth, speared on his fork the way Chiyoh has speared him with her question. "Which one?" he asks.

"Your shot was very precise," I say. "Missed everything important. Will has his full range of motion, though some scarring has affected its potential strength."

"Not so you'd notice," Will contradicts me, dipping his shrimp in the glaze on his plate before putting it in his mouth.

“After I was imprisoned,” I say, a valiant effort to change the subject, “Chiyoh was free to travel after so many years of confinement. Thanks in part to you, Will.”

“Your decision,” Chiyoh says to me, “let me see the world. His,” she directs this at Will, “set me free.”

“Chiyoh’s killed all sorts of people ever since she left Lithuania,” I tell Will after clearing my palate with a sip of wine – delightfully citriusy, perfect for the sweet spice of the dish.

“Not all sorts,” Chiyoh corrects me after dabbing her lips with her napkin and resettling it in her lap. “One sort. Greedy men.”

“Some of Mason Verger’s Sardinian thugs,” I recall for Will’s benefit, since he was unconscious at the time. “And several of the *politzia* who sold us to Muskrat Farm.”

“And one man in Delaware,” Chiyoh adds. This is new information and I find my brows climbing in surprise. “He wanted my money and passport.”

I’m so full of pride I can scarcely imagine eating our main course and dessert. Will’s influence has had a ripple effect of extraordinary magnitude. I smile at him, but he is looking at his plate, his expression uncertain as he moves an uneaten shrimp from one side of the china to the other.

The family must come together. I’m desperate to wed my past to my future, despite what Will told me in the kitchen and what Chiyoh revealed this afternoon. It would certainly help me process these revelations if the two of them could share my table in something more than icy civility.

Will senses my desires again. Clever boy. “Congratulations,” he says, and I think he means it. “I hope it felt… righteous.”

“I felt no joy,” she says. “And no pain. Only a sense of completion. There was a kind of peace. A feeling of being still.”

Will nods. “You’re a hell of a shot.” The delivery is gruff, but a compliment nevertheless. Will’s words are simple, as is their point of view, their agenda. It is an olive branch.

“Thank you,” Chiyoh says.

Progress.

We have a light salad with a citrus-coriander dressing for the next course. I am curious if Will and Chiyoh spoke while I was in the kitchen. They are looking at one another when I return. The atmosphere of the table is like a cloth with the wrinkles smoothed away, the candlelight a warmer shade of gold. I do not know what transpired but I am wildly grateful.

“Where did you go when you were traveling?” Will asks, his tone softly conversational.

“I went to Paris first,” Chiyoh says. She glances my way, her dark eyes like liquid shadow, the edge of her mouth showing the echo of a smile. “The first thing I did was eat *pain au*

chocolat. ”

“When the two of us lived with my aunt Murasaki, I would make *pain au chocolat* on Sunday mornings as the bells were ringing,” I say, smiling through my recollection. “A dozen for the week, but by evening six would be gone.”

Will’s smile shows teeth this time. “Sounds like me and beignets.”

“Or pastelitos,” I add. “I’ll make some tomorrow. Of both.”

“Just Paris then?” Will says as I refill the wine.

“For a time. Murasaki thought I should return to Japan.” Chiyoh pauses. “I did not. I wanted to see mountains.”

“What mountains did you find?” With each question, the tension unravels, a disintegrating rope snapping one strand at a time.

“I went to Nepal.” Chiyoh sets her fork down, her salad half-uneaten. Not like me to forget she doesn’t care for fresh cilantro. It has been decades since I’ve cooked for her, but it still feels like I’ve done something akin to dishonor. “I worked in a little hotel for climbers. I met people from all over the world.” She sips her wine, just a touch to her pale lips. “Some of them did not come back down the mountain,” she tells us. “It made me sad, so I left.”

“I’m, uh, no good with elevation,” Will says after he’s cleared his plate.

“Oh?” I didn’t know. Chiyoh tracks the surprise on my face that I allow to be evident. If I’m to be more open and honest with Will, perhaps I should be with anyone else I consider family.

“Yeah. Born below sea level.” Will leans back and lets me collect his salad plate. “My dad worked on boats, so we always lived by the water.”

I leave them alone again to fetch the next course, wheeling the fish in on an Art Deco-style dinner cart made of lacquered wood and gold. Will is in the middle of telling Chiyoh about a conference in Denver where he’d been asked to present his monograph on time of death based on insect activity. “By the time I, uh… acclimatized, the conference was over. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

She smiles; it seems genuine. Another strand bursts free from the rope.

Will and Chiyoh watch me crack the salt crust and remove it from each fish, careful to prevent any crumbles from mixing with the flesh. I filet each specimen and serve with a side of twice-fried plantains. Chiyoh asks Will how he caught the fish, and we both listen patiently as he retells their capture with far more detail than is necessary for a non-angling audience. I could let Will talk for hours about the nuances of fishing, but I am in love with him; I wouldn’t expect Chiyoh to be as enraptured. Still, she listens, and we compliment his catch. That is what family does.

It is over a dessert of traditional rice pudding that Chiyoh at last fulfills her errand. “I must tell you why I’ve come,” she says.

Will puts his spoon down, pudding barely tasted. He looks pale, even in the gold wash of candlelight. I react purely on instinct and take his hand, right there at the table.

“Jack Crawford has resigned from the FBI,” she says. I already knew this, but it is new information for Will.

Will drains his wine. “I’m guessing to… *avoid* criminal charges?”

“Yes.” Chiyoh is enjoying her dessert at least. “He is recruiting. Forming a team to find the two of you.”

“Recruiting… who? From where?” Will’s hand in mine is damp, holding onto me tightly.

“Former law enforcement and military. Security professionals. Civilian contractors. Criminals. He advertises on the dark web, and through word of mouth.”

“Without any bothersome laws to restrict him,” I muse as Will reclaims his hand and I rise to freshen drinks. “At last, Jack Crawford has broken completely from the system he once revered above all else.” I can tell Will is upset, so I keep my smile and my further thoughts to myself. I am delighted to have corrupted Jack entirely. He’s become no better than the Vergers or the easy-to-bribe government officials here in Cuba, or the dirty *politzia* of Florence. He’s become Rinaldo Pazzi. I am able to enjoy this revelation freely; Will is no longer his tool, his workhorse to drive until he collapses, his pretty bait to dangle in front of me.

“Jack Crawford once groomed Will to catch the Chesapeake Ripper,” I say after finishing dessert and abandoning my spoon. “He knows talent when he sees it; you caught me, didn’t you, Will?” I reach out to brush his hand where it lays, palm down, tense, on the tablecloth.

“Who’s he grooming this time?” Will wonders aloud, brow furrowed, the line of worry traveling up his forehead.

“Miriam Lass,” Chiyoh says. “She has left the FBI as well.”

“Her disappearance devastated him,” I muse, gathering up the dishes.

“And he still didn’t learn,” Will says darkly, lifting his napkin out of his lap and tossing it on the table to lean back and cross his arms. “He’s gonna get her killed for real this time.” After a pause, he asks Chiyoh, “How’s he financing all of this? I can’t imagine, uh, that mercenaries work for minimum wage.”

“I could find no evidence to answer that question,” Chiyoh says.

“But you know the answer, Will.” I say this over my shoulder as I leave for the kitchen with the last of the dishes and place them by the sink. When I return, Will is on his feet, scowling pensively out the window at the darkness, Chiyoh watching him with careful eyes.

He turns as I enter. “Alana and Margot,” he says. The names must be covered with needles; he winces as he says them.

“I’m sure it can’t be traced,” I say, “or proven. However, it would seem that the easiest explanation is the most likely.”

“Occam’s razor.” Chiyoh has risen, smoothing her skirt. I ask Will to show her to the music room while I blow out the candles and hang up my jacket.

When I join them, they each have a whiskey in hand. Will lifts his glass in a silent offering but I shake my head. I sit at the piano and Will and Chiyoh settle on the sofa to listen to me play. Once in a while I hear them murmuring softly together. Will has invited her to see the dogs tomorrow.

My heart feels comfortably full, a sensation akin to my sated belly after the well-balanced meal. The teacup didn’t come back together in the exact shape it held before it shattered, but kintsugi has repaired parts of it, and Will and I will continue to put pieces back as well as we can.

There will always be a large sliver of china missing. But we can make it hold tea again.

As I play, I let myself rest in this space, this warm little niche of family.

I look at Will and Chiyoh and then, against my will, I think of Jack Crawford and his plans for us.

My song changes. Something slower, a minor key.

After a time, Chiyoh finishes her drink and says goodnight. She puts a slender hand on my shoulder as she walks past. Will watches her as she leaves with a rustle of silk.

I close the cover on the piano and stand. Will is looking at the whiskey in his glass as if seeing something else instead of the honey-colored liquid. He glances my way with a smile as I sit next to him. “Dinner was really good,” he says.

“Thank you for providing the meat.” My smile feels entirely too breakable. I can’t let Will think I am anything but wildly confident that we will weather this news of our past life with very little trouble. I think of several things to say: *Jack’s tried before and never succeeded, by the time he finds us we’ll be gone, perhaps this will give us the chance to kill him together at last.* My voice dies in my throat and I vocalize none aloud, merely looking into Will’s Aegean-sea eyes.

“I didn’t want this,” I say, instead of what I’d finally decided to tell him — that we should look at Jack’s plans as an opportunity to perfect our design. “I knew it was inevitable, yet part of me hoped we’d be left alone.”

“I know,” Will says. His voice is smooth and warm, like his palm over my hand on the couch cushion.

“Just yesterday you told me you were happy,” I say. I cannot stop; I know I must be strong for my family, but I feel my foundations flooding, shifting on silt instead of bedrock. “I brought you happiness at last, Will. And through it, I found my own.”

“You don’t have to do everything by yourself,” he tells me.

“I have to protect you,” I argue.

“Yeah?” he challenges me. “And I have to protect you, too, Hannibal. You can’t put everything on your shoulders all the time.” I half-smile at him and he reaches for me. “Just relax for a second,” he advises. “Come here.”

I let him embrace me, then guide me to rest my head on his lap and put up my feet, toeing off my shoes as I raise them. It feels both perfectly natural and entirely strange at the same time. I have sat with Will like this before, with him curled up like a child. I arranged him this way when he was losing his grip on reality, when I wanted him to see me as his paddle and his anchor, his compass. It is a position of vulnerability. I can’t remember ever laying this way before with anyone, even my mother. I suppose that I did, but I have no memory of it. Reaching back far enough, I encounter nothing but ashes and mist. I have a photographic memory, but trauma has robbed me of some of my earliest recollections.

I rest my head on his thighs, and tuck one arm beneath myself on the cushioned surface. I let my other palm settle on his knee, my thumb tracing slow circles on the fabric of his trousers. Will drapes an arm over me, and uses the opposite hand to brush my hair back across my forehead, the pads of his fingers feather-light as they trace over my brow and glance off the curl of my ear.

“You took care of me for a long time,” Will says just above the hum of insects from outside. “After the Dragon, when I wasn’t speaking or-or awake, really. And you’ve been guiding me through the design. But I’m awake now, and I’m… capable, y’know.” He sighs. “I *know* you can handle everything. I could just sit back and-and let you shoulder… every burden, arrange every detail. Plan… everything, from the menu to which… pocket square to wear, to how to deal with Jack and everything else. But I *want* to help. I meant it when I said you don’t have to do everything yourself anymore. You’re not alone, Hannibal.”

I inhale slowly, and let out a long breath. I can feel my body’s tension sapping away, drawn off by his words, his touch.

“That is, if, uh, you can let go of some control,” Will adds, giving my hair a playful tug.

“Are you my psychiatrist, or are we just having conversations?” I tilt my head to smile up at him.

“Yes,” he says.

“Hmm.” I close my eyes for a few moments, relishing the feel of his fingertips, cradled in his scent and his genuine desire to ease what he perceives are my burdens. And, perhaps, they are. Will is extraordinarily perceptive. He has, at times, known more about my feelings than I know of them. He could name them, categorize them, give me this as a first step towards

mastering them. I can pretend all I want that I am humoring him, laying like this, letting him stroke my hair. If I am being honest with myself, I have never felt safer, even with Chiyoh and her rifle following my every move. It isn't logical, but there it is, in all its stubborn existence.

This frightens me. I am transported back to the night we spent after Tobias Budge tried to kill each of us in turn. I remember Will's anguish, his fury with himself for missing the shot that could have ended Budge before he came to my office. I remember how he fussed over me, desperate to do anything to provide solace. To pay penance, in his mind, for only shooting Tobias Budge in the ear instead of between the eyes.

I certainly felt better after helping myself to his virginity that night, not that I blamed him in the slightest. I could only feel an indefinite, limitless gratitude that he wasn't killed. I had spent a few excruciating hours thinking he was dead.

You want Will Graham because of his capacity to nurture. You need love, Hannibal. You want to be nurtured and cared for, and nurture and care for in return… It's really quite banal when held up for analysis. You're still the little orphan boy with a dead sister you couldn't protect.

I hear Bedelia's written words as if she was standing here, in this room, reciting them to me. They sear me with a scarring heat far more painful than Mason Verger's brand on my back. I am ashamed. Why am I ashamed of wanting Will in this way, in the role of a nurturer, a caregiver, if, indeed, that is a core element of my love for him?

I can't. I am *too seen* . It's too much.

"Every life is a piece of music. We are finite events, unique arrangements. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant. It seems that we are to hear from Jack's section of the orchestra soon enough." I say all of this nervelessly, my words cool and smooth like the sand after the waves have receded. I rise. Will lets me go and watches me slide my shoes back on.

"Walk me home?" Will requests.

I stand and offer my hand. He accepts it and gets to his feet. "Of course," I say.

We linger on his veranda, waiting for Luz to return from her before-bed dog business. "Is Chiyoh staying?" Will wants to know.

"For the time being," I say. "I won't have to worry about your safety while I'm in Havana during the day."

"You don't think Jack would, uhm… hurt Magdaly, or the kids?" Will crosses his arms and leans against one of the covered porch's support beams.

"Jack? Certainly not. Some of the people he's hiring? I can't say."

This makes Will quiet, pensive.

The dog returns. Will ushers her inside, then holds the door open for me. "I have an early morning again tomorrow," I say, despite the desperate flood of need that seems to fill my

body, originating from my bone marrow. I want my head back in his lap, his reassurance, his fingers in my hair, passing over my brow. I want to lay in his bed in the fetal position, the warm weight of his arm around me, my back against his chest. His words in my ear, that I can release my burdens, share them.

“Come inside.” It is an order, but it is so gentle I cannot help but obey. Will closes the door behind us, the dog returning to her nest and the puppies. We watch her settle in. The house is dark; we see one another with the small light above the stove in the kitchen. But I would know him anywhere. I would know my Will blind and deaf, I would know him by taste, touch, scent alone. Even when we are apart I can feel his presence. We are held together by something more than can be sensed by traditional means.

It is through this connection, I assume, that he knows I want him to embrace me, one arm behind my back, the other cupping my head and gently lowering it so that I may rest against his shoulder. I close my eyes and listen to the night and to the unknowable strand of music that connects us.

I wait in this dark place until I am no longer adrift. Then I circle my arms around him in return. I nuzzle the side of his neck and breathe, letting my lungs deflate slowly, my air whispering against his skin, moving the fine hairs at the nape of his neck.

He pulls back, brushing my hair across my forehead before kissing it. Then he lets go and crosses the small house to his bedroom door. Opens it. Goes inside, flipping on a soft light as an invitation.

I should leave. We had relations just last night. I let champagne influence our evening, not because it was best for us but because I wanted it to. What was I to do after all his flirtation? But it isn’t time yet for us to have unrestricted access to one another. I can’t be trusted with him if I do not operate within a framework of foundation-building.

All of these thoughts list themselves one after another, churning out of my mind, unfurling like an illuminated scroll.

And I ignore them. Every one.

I follow Will into his room. He’s pushed aside the netting and turned down the bed. I’ve caught him in mid-strip, taking off his jacket next to the open armoire. I watch him hang it up. I shut the door behind myself, the latch clicking with an air of finality.

He looks at me, his eyes luminous. I convince myself they are glowing in the dim lighting, which I’m fully aware is impossible. I think of fireflies, then snails, then the universe. So many stars and planets and galaxies, seven billion people on this tired earth, and here he is, at the side of the bed now, unbuttoning his cuffs and laying his wristwatch on the nightstand.

I go to him. How could I not?

Will puts his fingers gently on my shirtsleeves and kisses me, just a brush of his petal lips against mine.

With that kiss goes the last of my resolve. I care nothing for proper courtship, for boundaries, for foundations. I take him by the arms and lean against him, letting my greater weight drop us on the bed at an angle, pinning him beneath me. I grasp at his hair with one hand, tug impatiently at his clothing with the other, kiss him like I did the night I thought he'd been killed. My mouth is full of his tongue and of gratitude. God protects fools and children. And Will is not fortune's fool. He's mine. And I am his.

I use his hair to tip his head to the side so I can kiss his neck, catch that silky skin between my teeth, taste the texture of his stubble as I near the line of his jaw. He is making delightful sounds for me, wanton little moans and sighs, as if he is dizzy with pleasure. A sharp cry now as I bite him an inch above the clavicle on his left hand side. It will leave a mark, and the clothing meant for this climate will do nothing for him. I don't care. I want everyone to see it. I want it to make him blush, not in shame — though it will be perceived that way — but because he is thinking of me, desperate for me to do it again.

And he is. He wants me. Not only because he sees this as a way to provide succor. No, it is self-serving as well, which thrills me. Will works a hand between us to palm my erection through my clothing, cradling it, cupping and squeezing until I rut it against him, still latched to his mouth, now his neck again. I graze my tongue along his lower lip even as it moves. He is speaking. "We're going to kill him," he promises me. "Make it right. L-like it should have b-been…" His cheeks and lips are stained pink with desire and he writhes, pushing up into me as he can from his prone position.

I love him so much I am afraid to look at him, some remnant in my brain clinging to the shadow of Eurydice, or Lot's wife. He takes my head in his hands and lifts it so that I am forced into beholding. And I say what I always say when I am entirely overcome. I say his name.

No honor, no ego, no carefully made plans. I am no longer haunted by the ghosts of promises I could not keep. There is only Will, his body beneath mine, his desire so beautifully evident. I strip him from the waist down in a few savage movements, flinging his clothing aside. His throat again; I must have it, and I leave another mark where his shoulder meets the neck. Will has been stripped of his ego as well; he cries out, a high mewl so different from his usual subdued, velvety sighs and moans.

His expanse of skin; I need it against mine. I sit on his hips and lean back just enough to tear off my waistcoat and shirt, half-unbuttoning them and yanking them over my head. He attempts to free himself of his shirt but I chase his hands away and do it myself, ripping it open. I am against him again, the planes of our chests together, an expanse of human warmth. He plants his elbows on the bed and pushes himself up against me in any way he can. I am holding his arms down at the biceps by the sleeves of the opened shirt and my own strength.

I drag my tongue over his nipple and he blushes further, sweat glimmering on his brow and along his sternum, catching the soft light. He angles his head down and to the side so he can watch me do it, glimpsing my tongue as it emerges again and again, moistening a place for my teeth.

I don't use it. I move my mouth at the last second and mark a place along his ribs. It must be excruciating; the skin and muscle so close to the bone. This time, though, Will barely makes

a sound. He breathes through the pain and absorbs it as part of himself.

I manage to get free of my trousers and undergarment, just enough to press myself against his length, trapping us together by draping myself over him, rutting against one another. His hands are free and grasping, possessive in his own right. I will show him that he has me. I snare his wrists above his head, pushing them down into the mattress one-handed as I use my other arm for leverage. He wants to touch me. I want him to, but stronger is the instinct to control what he is allowed.

Because there are so many things I cannot control.

Psychoanalyzing myself during sex seems rude, like thinking about someone else, and I easily ignore the thought as it surfaces. It is much easier to look down at him, supine, pushing up against me, trying to get free, trapped between his attempt to reclaim autonomy and the obvious pleasure of our frottage.

I move my hips and he stops fighting me, angling his head back, eyes closed, lips parted, curls dampened with perspiration. When he is like this, heating up beneath me, his scent is the freshest. It brings me an olfactory bliss that the rarest foods and flowers cannot compete with.

And as soon as he lulls me into security, he tries to get free again, slipping one of his wrists out of my grip. Clever boy. My clever, unpredictable boy. Mine.

I grip him by the free arm just below his elbow and force him back onto the bed again, my other hand locked around his forearm on the opposite side. I angle over him and he turns his face away from me with a growl of frustration that is only half-serious. I make it up to him by thrusting in earnest now, kissing him in tandem. His mouth falls away from mine to emit another ego-less moan that echoes faintly in the corners of the room.

He turns his head and sees the open windows, sucking his lower lip into his mouth and biting it with a little smile. When it slips out of his teeth again I bite it instead, kiss him over and over, feverish, possessive, keeping together here even as I move back and thrust forward again, again, again, sweat from my brow dripping onto his. I only let him break the connection when he orgasms and drops his head back again to shudder and say my name, covering his abdomen with his warm emission. I lean away to watch it glisten over his scar as he relaxes back, panting heavily.

I drag my fingers through it and collect it on my hand, rubbing it against his perineum. I want to penetrate him, but I don't have the patience; somewhere behind the feral haze of red I hesitate to have our first time since the fall be painful for him. There are other pleasures to be had.

Now that he's climaxed, Will is pliable and easy to arrange on the bed to my liking, on his knees and elbows, the lovely curve of his backside rising up to be admired. I run my length between his legs, and he lets out a quivering sigh as the head of my shaft hits the back of his, the entire region still tender from the finish. I palm his backside with one hand, stroking and squeezing intermittently before gripping his hip and his hair with equal mercilessness. Will moves with me as he can, catching my rhythm within moments, more than happy, it seems, to

be used like this, controlled in this way. He knew what I needed when it was safety and comfort, and he knows what I need now.

And the way he moves, breathes, moans, blushes — he wants to give, but it pleases me to no end that it is not entirely selfless. I know how much he enjoys being taken and consumed. That's reciprocity.

My orgasm is intense, despite having enjoyed a release only 24 hours ago. It leaves me perfectly exhausted, draped over Will's back. He lowers himself onto the bed in gentle increments and I rest my full weight on him, still cradled between his thighs until I inch my way out. As our breathing evens out, I lift my fingers to his lips and press them into his mouth so he can taste the remnants of himself. He sucks appreciatively and only stops when I do.

But now, somehow, he is the one holding me, our usual positions reversed. I have my head on his heart and my arm around his midsection, and he has me pulled close, stroking my shoulder, my back, my hair. I only realize after a time how tightly I am clinging to him, as if the world is spinning too quickly and physics will fling us apart.

Playing games with Jack Crawford was much more pleasurable when there was nothing and no one to risk but myself and my freedom. Now I am on my honor to protect Will, and by keeping him safe, I preserve myself. If something happens to him, I will not survive it. Will once quoted the musician Bob Dylan to me. *When you got nothin' you got nothin' to lose.*

The silence is suddenly oppressive in the wake of these thoughts, so I fill it. "Will?"

"Hmm?" he sounds half-asleep already.

"May I ask what you and Chiyoh discussed while I was preparing the salads?" I pause. "I felt a shift in the atmosphere of the room when I returned. It seemed you eased the tension."

"Yeah," Will confirms, his fingertips sliding through my hair, running from my temple to the back of my neck. "She, uh… she asked me, 'are you going to try and kill Hannibal again?' and I said, 'no.' Then, she-she said, 'are you in love with him?' and I said… 'yes.'" He sighs, but I can hear that it is with a smile. It is somehow different, the sound of his air leaving his lungs, if it has to pass through a smile. "That was it."

"Iron and silver," I murmur to myself.

He doesn't ask me what I mean. Instead, he says, "I should have told you about what happened with her. Before she, uh, showed up, I guess."

I think of Antony Dimmond, and Bedelia, but everything is too fragile right now. "I'm pleased the two of you made amends," I say instead.

"Not the first time I've been shot by a friend."

The reference to Jack makes me cling to him again.

"It's gonna be okay," he says.

I don’t know how to respond to his platitudes. I wish I could kiss him and agree, but I am not so careless with my words, even if they are said to alleviate suffering. And so, I change the subject entirely. “Mr. and Mrs. Lesko have resumed some social interactions,” I tell him. “They are still uncertain as to Hank’s fate, but Richard has insisted that the best course of action is to resume their lives until they know more. He has told Marguerite in no uncertain terms that distraction from her turmoil is required.”

“Huh,” Will says. He is trying to be nonchalant, I think, but I can sense the excitement building in him, cutting through his exhausted and sated body. “The feast has, ah… *presented* itself.”

“The feast is life,” I say, angling myself up on my elbow to kiss him. “Eat it and live.”

Season 4 Episode 9: Sacramentals

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal host Richard and Marguerite Lesko for dinner, and Will's authentic Cajun cooking has a "secret ingredient." His design is complete and it's time to celebrate.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “When the Levee Breaks” – Led Zeppelin

“Cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do you no good
No, cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do you no good
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move, ooh
All last night sat on the levee and moaned
All last night sat on the levee and moaned
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home...”

I have deliberately filled my life with places and people and objects that gratify my taste. I am a student of aesthetics. My eyes are trained to seek out the sublime, my hands to recreate it through my art and my music.

I have seen Paris in the spring, walked the piazzas of Florence in the autumn, sweltered in rich, gorgeous Spanish summers, and visited Prague at Christmas. I have eaten my fill of Lithuanian sunrises and Cuban sunsets.

But what I encounter when I step into my kitchen is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

Will is at the counter, his back to me. He’s wearing a black tank and a pair of exercise shorts, having never changed after his workout, it seems. The kitchen is warm, the day humid, and his skin glistens with perspiration. It dampens his hair, loosening his curls. Barefoot. I can smell him from here, the muskiness of his sweat mingling with the remnants of cologne and once-clean clothes. I cannot breathe deeply enough; my lungs want to glut themselves.

I can easily see the shapeliness of his calves as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, the curve of his backside defined within the slick, man-made fabric of his shorts; the silvery cloth carries a slight sheen that accentuates the curves just so. The cuts of muscle on his shoulders and arms make me weak.

Perspiration darkens the little scrap of a shirt in a thick line down his back. His skin glistens with it, accentuating the marks I've left on the side of his neck and the curve of his shoulder. I can discern, even from this distance, the livid suck-bruises and the teeth-shaped shadows. They would be far more evident if he was as white as he'd been back in Maryland, but this climate has darkened his skin, despite my reminders for him to apply sun block. Still, he wears them openly, unconcerned with the possibility of Chiyoh passing through. Proudly, I think.

He has peeled the skin from Hank Lesko's arm and is working small pieces of meat free from the digits and heel of the hand with his fingers, dropping them into a bowl.

The 1950s-era radio on the shelf nearby plays Novísima Trova and I am frozen, overcome. I cannot move, only watch helplessly as he picks up a sweating glass and raises it to his lips. A drop of condensation trickles down his chin, under his jaw, and along the sweet line of his throat.

Will twists and tears a finger free from the skinned hand, working at it to get all the meat he can. Another crack as he wrenches bone from bone. The sound is a thousand times more resonant than the bells of Notre Dame, calling me to worship not some capricious god, but him. A call I am desperate to answer; I want to pray on my knees before him, to confess and be absolved, and to take communion.

Will has snapped off all of the fingers now, leaving the stripped bones on a plate. All of the meat from Hank Lesko's severed arm is now in the bowl, the bones, cartilage, and tendons separated. He runs water in one side of the sink and washes his hands; before he turns to pick up the towel, I am there, pressed against him from behind. I welcome the warm dampness of his sweat as it absorbs into my linen shirt and waistcoat. The taste of his natural salt, mingling with the flesh of his throat and the gentle scent of the meat is pure heaven. I angle my mouth over the mark I've already left, kissing it, not as an apology for the pain but to remind him of its existence. Another kiss at the corner of his jaw, and I nuzzle the side of my face into his hair, circling his body with my own. He chuckles and leans back into me. "Didn't hear you come in," he says.

"You were very absorbed in your work."

"Can't let anything go to waste." I glance over his shoulder and see he already has the sausage casings soaking in warm water. "Did you find pecan wood?"

"I did." He slides free of my grip and retrieves his glass; the liquid inside is oak-brown, poured over ice. "Tea?"

He smirks. "Try it."

I take the perspiring glass from his hand and raise it to my lips. The taste of black tea is faint, overpowered by sugar and the tiniest drop of lemon juice. I force myself not to make a face. Instead, I step forward, trapping him against the edge of the sink, and kiss him. "Mmm," he murmurs into my mouth, putting his hands on my neck and shoulder. I bend just enough to run my fingers between his legs, the outline so evident beneath the athletic shorts, the silky acrylic fabric making for a delightful handful.

When I hear his breath catch, I know he is sufficiently distracted. I reach behind him and pour the tea into the open side of the sink.

He hears the ice clink, however, and my grope is not enough to keep his attention. “Hey,” he scolds me, taking back his glass.

“Will,” I say, “You will not have a single tooth left in your head if you drink this regularly.”

He laughs, another rich cathedral-bell sound, tipping his chin back an inch or two. “What, you don’t like Granny G’s sweet tea recipe? Y’know, uh, come to think of it, she did wear dentures. Big white ones. Used to scare me as a kid.”

“You have pretty teeth, Will. You shouldn’t put them at risk.” I know mine are less than perfect; my time living feral in the woods after Mischa died, and at the orphanage, did not encourage healthy oral development.

“All the better to eat you with, my dear.”

I love Will always, but especially when he is like this; smiling, full of wit and little jokes delivered with wonderful dryness or playful acidity. Back in Baltimore, I only saw tiny glimpses of his humor; given tight-lipped, pained smiles. When he did grin at me, it was only for a moment, and he always dropped the expression, looking away as if he didn’t think it was something I wanted to see.

He folds himself into my arms and rests his head on the hollow of shoulder-meets-neck. “Is it tomorrow yet?” he asks through a nervous laugh.

“No, and a good thing – we have work to do.” I put my arm around his shoulders and steer him over to the cork board on the kitchen wall. No longer our road map to Hank Lesko’s murder, it now holds Will’s scribbled-down recipes and the checklist for our menu. “Do you remember the totem pole case, Will?”

“No forgetting that.” He slides out of my grasp and pulls a smaller bowl down from the cupboard, measuring salt into it.

“The creator wanted to secure his legacy by building a monument.” I open a drawer to retrieve an apron, putting it on after removing my waistcoat and draping it carefully over the back of a chair. I unbutton my cuffs.

“Peace in the pieces disassembled.” Will adds two heaping teaspoons of cayenne pepper, then two tablespoons of smoked Hungarian paprika. “His body of work. Too bad the crown jewel was his actual son.”

“Regardless of the mistaken identity, it was an impressive creation.”

“Yeah.” Will adds thyme next, then picks up the pestle to grind all of the spices together. He seems wistful as he works; I am aware of his state of mind but I am also aware of the state of his forearms as he grinds the spices and salt, the deep grooves of muscle and ropes of tendon and ligament.

“What you have made is already superior in every way.” I tell him this casually as I set up the meat grinder on the prep table.

Will freezes and turns to me. I have his full attention now, despite the bulb of garlic in one hand and the knife in the other. I am awash with the pleasant anticipation of saying what I will say next, knowing it will be akin to giving him another rare gift, one that I am more than certain he wants: my approval of his work as a colleague and an equal. My peer review.

“The monument-maker’s creation was not only flawed by a case of mistaken identity,” I say, “but its reach was limited. The authorities took photographs, to be sure, and they exist in books and online for an audience of those accustomed to seeing horror, who have an interest in crimes and atrocities. But your design was streamed directly into the faces of those who would choose to subscribe to a channel like Hank Lesko’s. They had no desire to see, but you held their eyes open. And the images still circulate, copies of copies of copies, uncontrolled by the authorities or curated like crime scene photos. Your work is not contained to sealed case files, unavailable to the general public until the investigations are closed, or so cold there is no hope of solving them. Your design is beautiful in that it is egalitarian.”

Will’s eyes are wet, and the kind of smile a groom has upon seeing his bride step up next to him at the altar, more precious than he has ever seen her, tugs at the corner of his mouth.

“Right now, hundreds, if not thousands of armchair detectives all over the world are trying to determine if the video is authentic, and if it is, who filmed it and why.” I have finished assembling the grinder, and place my hands lightly on the handle, one over the other. “If you disappear now, Will, if you never kill again, the legacy of this murder will exceed the monument-maker’s. By killing one man, you have surpassed him so entirely it is like he never existed. All of them – the Angel-Maker, Peter Bernadone’s social worker, even the Muralist with his divine palette of colors.” I pause, then say what I mean to say, running the risk of damaging my ego beyond repair. “You’re giving the Chesapeake Ripper a run for his money.”

Will slowly puts the garlic and the knife back on the counter, and comes to me. The way he looks at me, his smile, the tears in his eyes – all I can feel is pride.

Will is my legacy.

“T-thank you, sweetheart.” His voice is thick with emotion and shaded with both joy and disbelief.

I smile and open my arms, and he all but jumps into them, those delectable bare toes curling against the tiled floor to lift him the extra two inches.

“Your first and main courses were already a roaring success,” I say into his ear, holding him close, tight, tighter. “Tomorrow is going to make a lovely dessert.”

We slowly release one another, and I thumb away the tear beneath his eye as he beams at me with those beautiful teeth I won’t allow sweet tea to ruin. “Speaking of desert,” he says. “I have an idea.”

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“Wake up, Will.”

Will opened his eyes with a little groan. Then, in a flash, his post-nap lethargy was gone and he sat up, thrills of anticipation tightening his stomach and tickling his spine from neck to tailbone. The air was cool – to accommodate their guests, they’d closed up the house and turned on the precious air conditioning. Hannibal had wanted to do it earlier in the day, during dinner prep, but Will had responded with, “Listen, if this is gonna be authentic, it should be hot as hell in the kitchen. You gotta sweat into it. That’s part of the flavor.”

Now, chilly air blew down on Hannibal’s bed from a vent in the ceiling, making his bare chest break out in gooseflesh. Hannibal himself stood at his side, a warm, heavy hand on his shoulder. He was mostly dressed already, smelling incredible, as usual, wearing a lavender-blue waistcoat and trousers with a crisp white shirt beneath, missing his coat and tie yet.

“They’re still coming, right?” Will’s heart dreaded a cancellation.

“Yes,” Hannibal soothed, stepping back as Will got out of bed.

Will sighed with a nervous smile that felt pinched across his face. “Guess I better, ah…”

“I’ll set out your things.” Hannibal gave him a reassuring kiss.

Will showered in Hannibal’s en-suite bathroom, then shaved with more care than he could remember taking since he’d shown up at Hannibal’s office wearing a salmon-colored shirt. Hannibal had already set out the selected skincare products and aftershave. He returned to the bedroom with the towel around his waist to find Hannibal at the vanity mirror tying his pale pink tie with steady, practiced fingers.

He saw Will’s reflection in the mirror as well and turned, his tie only half secured, taking in the view for a long moment before returning to his task. “Get dressed,” he said, and it felt like an order.

Will checked the clock. “Are we running late?”

“No.” Hannibal adjusted his tie. “I need you to cover yourself, Will.”

Will laughed, pulling on his underwear, then settled on the edge of the bed to put on the pair of socks Hannibal had laid out. “Distracted?”

“You look – and smell – good enough to eat,” Hannibal admitted as he brought Will the selected pair of trousers, pale tan in color, then helped him into the pristine white shirt. “But we already have plans for dinner.” Will tucked in the tails and looped in the belt Hannibal handed to him. Next came a double-breasted jacket in forest green with thin lapels, tapered in for a more slender cut than the style Hannibal usually wore. Now the pocket square, a rich brown with a white diamond pattern.

Will brushed his hair back in the mirror, then paused, examining his reflection.“I, uh, think we have a little problem here.” One of Hannibal’s marks was still visible on his throat where

the two sides of his collarbone met.

Hannibal joined him in the mirror, a hand on the small of his back. “Not to worry.” He opened a drawer and removed a long piece of gold, green, and brown paisley-printed silk, tapered in the middle and wider towards the ends, sliding it with a faint hiss around Will’s neck. The feeling of the cool, satiny fabric on his throat made Will’s breathing tick up a couple of notches as he suddenly imagined several things that were not conducive to putting clothes on, but rather taking them off.

Hannibal adjusted the ascot to his liking, puffing up the front of it just so, and tucking it into Will’s collar. “There.”

Will examined himself with a little grimace. Hannibal caught his eye in the mirror. “You feel like an impostor,” he said. “Dressed up in another man’s clothes.”

Will nodded.

Hannibal guided his chin so Will had to look directly at him, not through the proxy of the mirror. “Will,” he said, “this is who you are now, if you’d like to be. You look stunning, even if it takes some getting used to. Then again,” he traced the back of his fingers down Will’s freshly-shaven face. “When are you not? Just as beautiful in anything else.”

Will took his hand, dropping their eye contact. “Cut it out,” he said, though it was through a smile.

“I certainly will not.” Hannibal retrieved a small box from a dresser drawer and opened it, showing Will the contents. Resting on pink silk was a gold lapel pin in the shape of a stag’s head, the eyes made of tiny rubies. Hannibal lifted it from the box and fixed it on Will’s jacket. When finished, he shifted a curl from one side of Will’s head to the other, then nodded. “Are you ready?”

Will fingered the pin. “This is – uhm…”

“For you,” Hannibal said, as simply as if he was passing off the telephone or talking about the weather.

Will didn’t have any words, so he used his mouth for something else, his palm resting on Hannibal’s neck, fingers splayed on the side of his jaw.

“We will be late,” Hannibal said, a whisper against his lips, “if we allow any more distractions.”

“Right,” Will said, taking Hannibal’s offered arm. They went downstairs to wait for their guests.

***

I expect Will to be nervous when the Leskos arrive, bringing with them a furious silence that tells me they had a squabble on the boat ride over. If Will is as anxious as he’s been all day,

he doesn't show it; he clasps Richard's hand enthusiastically and returns the manly clap on the shoulder.

"Hey Doc, hey there, Chris, how the hell are ya? Jumpin' Jesus it's hot out there, and I'm from Texas, you'd think I'd be used to it." Richard's face is red and he fans it briefly with his hat before giving the Panama to me to hang up. This climate is taxing on his heart, but when one is a fugitive, one does not always have the luxury of choosing where to live. I feel this acutely – if I had my choice, Will and I would be in Florence or Paris now.

When Marguerite leans in to kiss the air next to Will's face, he turns his head to make contact with her cheek, deliberately stepping into her space as if they are far more acquainted than they are. His smile for her is sweet and welcoming, and he tells her she looks nice, that he likes the color of her dress. She does not, in fact, look well at all – thinner, even, than when he saw her last, with dark circles under her eyes she's barely attempted to conceal with makeup. I notice a chip in one of her painted fingernails. These details of her pain and uncertainty as to Hank's fate are precious and I hope Will notices them.

I'm not sure Will fully understands why he wants Marguerite to feel such incredible pain. Yes, she was trying to have an affair with me – had plans to use her charms to convince me to kill Richard. The femme fatale effect on Will's jealousy. And he clearly relished killing Hank Lesko for his sex trafficking and insufferable rudeness. But beneath all of this, like the deep roots of a magnificent tree, is another truth. Will's mother abandoned him. *This* mother loved her son, despite how despicable he was as a human being.

Why then did Will's mother leave him when he did nothing so horrendous as victimize vulnerable girls? Why should Hank Lesko receive the love that Will Graham was denied?

That is why I paid men to steal the yacht. I wanted to prolong Marguerite's suffering for Will to see. It is my gift to him, far more precious than the lapel pin I gave him tonight.

And she suffers. I have prescribed her all sorts of medication to dull her pain and ease her nerves and none of it works. In fact, some of the pills make things worse.

We have a cocktail in the music room before dinner begins. "A Sazerac?" Richard is delighted. "I haven't had one of these in years! Used to drink 'em all the time when I was on business in New Orleans."

"Christopher is from Louisiana," I say as I pass around the tray of drinks. "It was his idea to serve you several things tonight that may remind you of the Southern United States."

"You homesick too, Chris?" Richard asks after a long sip of his drink. "Man, I can't tell you what I'd do for a goddamn McDonald's cheeseburger."

"Not so much," Will says, and he looks at me when he says it, to be sure that I know. "I mean, I've got everything I need for the, uh, Louisiana experience. Heat, snakes, 'gators – though they're crocodiles, but…" He shrugs.

"I 'spose you had to get the Southern out of your voice when you moved to Baltimore." Richard goes on a lengthy rant about Yankees and the East Coast in general. Will nods as

though he is listening, but I see him watching Marguerite, who drinks heavily in silence, her hands shaking where she clutches the glass.

At last, the dining room. I seat everyone, making sure to place Will directly across from Marguerite so he can observe her as he wishes. I withdraw to the kitchen to prepare the oysters, leaving Will to entertain. I find myself hurrying through the preparation, nearly slicing myself with the oyster knife. I have to trust that Will can maintain his facade as well as be an adequate host.

I return with fresh-caught oysters on the half-shell, served with a mignonette dipping sauce with a dash of Will's Cajun spices. My heart unclenches when I hear the laughter from the dining room. I should have known; my Will can do anything he puts his mind to. No doubt he is reading the Leskos like he used to read the minds of killers, using his extraneous neurons to put them at ease. Marguerite seems to have relaxed a bit, but that is likely due to the amount of alcohol she's consumed already.

"Listen," Richard is saying through a grin, "I'm a Texas man, you know that – but I went to Georgia and I don't know if I can stay for dinner if you're an Auburn fan."

"Hell no," Will promises, and they touch their glasses with a good-natured laugh. "Alabama all the way. Roll tide."

"Yeah, I hate to say it, but they're lookin' pretty good this season. Man, I'd love to go to a game again. None of this soccer crap – real American football."

The oysters are fresh, the flesh firm and briny and bright in taste, accompanied perfectly by our mignonette. Marguerite makes a sound of approval, and tells us she enjoys the little twist on the authentic French recipe. Richard asks for crackers and hot sauce. I thought he might, so I have them ready.

After we've finished the first course, Will comes around to gather the plates; as he leans in to get mine, he puts his hand briefly on my shoulder and gives it an affectionate squeeze. I feel the press of his palm long after he has returned to the kitchen to fetch the salad.

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As Will arranged the shrimp with remoulade on the pre-made beds of lettuce, he concentrated on breathing. So far, everything was going well, if he could just stop sweating. He paused to blot a dish towel to his forehead and loaded up the dinner cart with the plates.

He could feel Hannibal's support and approval radiating off of him like waves of heat. The sensation backed Will away from the edge of anxiety as he put the salads down in each place, then refilled the glasses with more white wine. There was a brief pause as everyone tried the food.

"Nothin' like a good remoulade," Richard complimented. "You can order the bottled stuff, but it isn't the same."

Will waited until the right time to ask Marguerite about her former careers after refilling her wine again. She opened up easier than he thought she would, telling them how her modeling agent had discovered her working in an ice cream shop and offered her a contract on the spot. She blamed the failure of her debut record on another singer represented by the same label who was sleeping with the head of the marketing department – jealous, of course, of Marguerite's talent.

At last, it was time for the main course. Hannibal gathered the salad plates, giving Will a lingering look, his dark eyes shining with a mixture of humor and the delight of a shared secret.

"Oh my Lord — mmm! Smell that–!" Richard erupted in delighted partial sentences as Hannibal served him a plate of Will's jambalaya. "You really outdid yourself, Chris."

Will thanked him, but he barely heard the man's praises. He was watching Marguerite as she picked up her fork and looked at the concoction of pork, chicken, sausage, and rice. Richard had already stuffed in a mouthful and was making sounds of almost sensual approval as he chewed.

"We made our own andouille sausage," Hannibal said, spearing a piece of it with his fork. Will watched him eat it with a more subdued sound of appreciation.

"This a family recipe?" Richard guessed after sucking down a mouthful of wine.

"Yeah, it is," Will heard himself say, sharing a glance with Hannibal. "My Granny G's."

"There's a secret ingredient," Hannibal said and Will's heart did a back flip.

"Oh yeah? What is it?" Richard didn't wait for an answer before taking another bite.

"Uhm, if I, uh, tell you, I'd have to kill ya," Will said. Richard guffawed and slapped the table.

But more importantly, Marguerite Lesko smiled and took a bite of her son. "Delicious," she said after clearing her palate with a drink. "Complex. Do you cook for Boris?"

"No, he's better at it than I am," Will said. At last, he took a bite of his own. He knew from taste-testing the batch how good it was, but there was something else, a succulent flavor now that he couldn't name. It wasn't like he was tasting it so much as feeling it. It was righteous, delicious, beautiful.

"He has a few specialties I'm unable to replicate," Hannibal said.

"He won't tell you the secret ingredient?" Marguerite asked after Will watched her throat bob as she swallowed another chunk of andouille sausage, filled with pork shoulder and her son's shoulder as well.

"We have no secrets between us." Hannibal raised his glass to Will, who smiled in return. Will turned back to Marguerite just in time to see the poisonous look she barely managed to

suppress, directed partially at her husband, and partially, Will thought, at the idea of a loving relationship.

Richard cleaned his plate and inquired about seconds. “Save room for dessert,” Hannibal suggested instead. “Christopher has another regional specialty for us.”

“Y’think I should?” Richard ran a hand over the bulge of his belly. “Thought you told me I need to be cuttin’ down on sweets, Doc. That a bad diet’s just as bad, if not worse, than stress. And trust me,” he chuckled wryly, “we’ve had some stress in our lives recently.”

Marguerite’s face paled and she reached for her nearly-empty wine glass. Hannibal got up and refilled it after uncorking a new bottle.

“Yeah, I, um… well, I didn’t want to mention anything upsetting,” Will said, trying to reign in his burning curiosity. “But I want you both to know that, uh, Boris and I are… we just want you to know we’re… *thinking of you* in this difficult time.”

“Difficult time? What difficult time?” Richard demanded, even as his wife shrank down in her chair, brushing a sudden tear from her cheek. “My son is a *jackass* . Plain and simple. He was a jackass when he was a little ankle-biter and that never changed.” Richard didn’t look at his wife, but his next words were hurled at her with the surety of Achilles’ spear. “He was spoiled growing up. Never had to take responsibility for anything he did.”

“You think the video is a hoax.” Hannibal’s statement might have been a question, but it wasn’t.

“ *Oui* ,” Marguerite agreed in a rush before Richard could open his mouth. “I think someone put him up to it, one of those online challenges young people are always doing.”

“See what I mean?” Richard said, jerking a thumb toward his wife. “She’ll make any excuse for ‘im. The fact that he’d do something like this to his lovin’ mother…”

Hannibal got up in a smooth, unobtrusive motion to collect the plates and bring in dessert. Will tracked his movement while simultaneously planning what to say next. “I hope it’s just a… prank, if you can call it that.”

“Have you watched the videos?” Marguerite asked eagerly.

“N-no, I, uh, I get upset by a lot of blood,” Will said. It took everything, every fiber of his being, not to smile as he said it. “Even if I know it isn’t real.”

“Everything in it appears staged. I’ve been told by film industry experts it could be faked with practical effects,” Marguerite said, leaning forward and speaking softly as if telling a secret. “That’s why there are no digital markers of alteration.”

“How do you know it wasn’t CGI?” Will asked as Hannibal came back in with the cart bearing a covered dish and a carafe of coffee.

“She’s spent a goddamn fortune having it analyzed,” Richard said, not looking directly at his wife, choosing instead to sneer at her in his periphery. “Margie and I disagree on the finer

points. We both know it's fake, but she thinks that after he filmed the video, the yacht was taken by Somalian pirates and Hank was kidnapped. According to her, we should be hearing from them any day now about a ransom."

"And what do you think?" Will asked as Hannibal provided them each with a café Cubano.

"I think he did what he always does!" Richard pounded on the table again. "He went off to Barbados or somewhere to have a good time and couldn't be bothered to let us know."

"It must be hard, not knowing where he is." Will said this softly, letting his words curl in delicate comfort as they made their way out of his mouth and through the air toward Marguerite.

"It is," she said, pressing her lips together and looking at her napkin, which she'd balled up in her fist. "It's a nightmare."

Hannibal waited a beat before sliding a plate in front of Richard and setting down a dessert fork. Richard leaned forward and inhaled. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked Will with a sly grin.

"Sweet potato pie," Will confirmed as Hannibal served Marguerite, and then Will and himself.

Richard lifted a heaping forkful to his mouth and chewed with relish. "Oh Lord have mercy," he managed. "That is a slice of *heaven* right there."

"We couldn't get marshmallows anywhere," Will said with an apologetic wave of his own fork.

"Doesn't need 'em – mmm!" Richard's piece was gone in less than a minute.

"We'll send you home with the rest," Will promised, glancing Hannibal's direction, and receiving a clandestine wink in return.

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Will and I see the Leskos off, and then return to the kitchen to do the necessary clearing up, leaving some tasks for tomorrow. We work in tandem in a liminal place, a charged silence between us. I cannot tell what he is thinking. I don't know what to ask. All I can do is touch him from time to time, communicating my reassurance as I can; a hand on his shoulder, against his elbow, on his back, brushing the backs of my fingers against the side of his hand as I pass. I am buoyant with pride. The entire evening was a success. I don't know why he's quiet but I wait patiently for him to tell me.

When I steal glances at him, he is smiling and absent-minded, walking away from the sink with the water still on, only half-drying the wine glasses. I follow his path around the kitchen and pick up where he left off.

Will glances at the clock and widens his eyes, startled. "I need to let the dogs out," he says. "Are we…"

“I’ll finish,” I assure him, and watch him wander out the back door towards the cabana house. Is he sleepwalking? Is he having a blackout? It would break my heart if he didn’t remember this beautiful evening.

I finish our chores and go upstairs. The air conditioning is still on, and the house has cooled unevenly; such is the fate of old structures. My bedroom is almost uncomfortably chilly. Still, I take off my clothes and hang them up, and slide on a robe. Then I linger at the french doors leading to my balcony and wait.

He’s gone long enough that I find myself crestfallen; has he gone to bed? I sit down on my own and stretch my body out, lacing my hands over my abdomen, staring at the netting draped over the canopy. I replay the evening from start to finish and find only the beautiful completion of Will’s design, a flawless victory. I can’t account for his reaction, and perhaps he can’t either. I have no way of knowing unless he talks to me.

There is a soft knock at the door. “Come in,” I call, getting to my feet and re-tying my robe in case it is Chiyoh.

Will opens the door, steps through, shuts it behind himself. “Hey,” he says.

“I wasn’t sure I’d see you again tonight.” I watch him as he removes the stag pin from his lapel and replaces it in the box on my dresser with the utmost care, closing the lid.

“I didn’t mean to – I was kind of… uhm, out of it there for a while.” He shakes his head and smiles ruefully.

“Disassociating?” That would be a tragedy. That would imply his mind saw tonight as a trauma it needed to distance itself from, bolting down the nearest hole and cowering in the dark.

“No.” His voice is full of wonder. He looks me in the eye at last and crosses the room to stand before me. “More like *associating* . I was so… I was so *present* it was… the most *awake* I’ve ever been. Everything was so bright and-and *clear*... like I was seeing everything for the first time.” He rubs a hand across his eyes, then back through his hair, mussing the careful style. “I let Luz out and I just stood there,” he tilts his chin up, “staring at the stars, f-feeling the-the air and…” He drops his chin and looks at me, rubbing his thumbnail over his lower lip before relaxing his features into a self-deprecating smile. “I don’t know how long I was out there. Then Luz started whining to be let back in to the puppies and I… realized I’d just left you without saying goodnight, and…” He shrugs. “And now that I’m here I don’t wanna say goodnight because I want to tell you about this and, uhm…” He chuckles. “I’m not sure what… I’m saying.”

“Will.” I stroke his cheek.

“I’ve only felt like this once before,” he says softly, leaning into my hand as I cup his cheek. “And it was only for a minute – *part* of a minute. Right after the Dragon, when I realized he wasn’t getting back up again. Even after Hank Lesko, it wasn’t quite the same.”

“That’s because your design wasn’t complete,” I say. “Not until tonight.”

“It was – *so beautiful* ,” he says, just above a whisper. “I should have stayed with you, tried to explain it, but I was…” He puts his hand over his heart. “I didn’t know what it was and- and I–”

“Will.” I pull him into a reassuring embrace. “You had a private moment with your design. While I would have been delighted to know what was going through your head, I know the feeling of being so overcome.”

“I’m still…” Will eases back from me and shows me his hand. It is trembling.

I take his hand between my own and kiss it. “Let yourself be overcome,” I suggest. “Lean into these moments. I know them well, and they are both exquisite and rare.”I kiss him, just a gentle brush of our lips. “Like you,” I cannot help but add.

He grins again for me, a moment of unchecked happiness, and kisses me again, harder this time. “Here’s the other thing,” he says, brushing his hand through my hair, the other splayed against my backside. “I seem to recall you saying something about how the next time you got me in a suit you were gonna rip it off of me.”

I remember exactly what I said, and I need no further coaxing to fulfill my prophecy. Will’s design is complete, as is the careful, budding phase of our second courtship; of each of these things I am certain. It is a miracle, this sense of wondrous connection re-established and stronger than ever before.

Will leans in for a kiss and I give him ten times what he bargained for, taking him by the lapels of his jacket and spilling us both onto the plush rug positioned next to the bed. It happens so quickly he loses a shoe in the process, the first item to go, and the air slams out of his lungs in a startled sigh followed by a devious laugh. True to my word I rip his jacket and shirt open, buttons flying in all directions. He lays back and lets me unbuckle his belt and pull everything below the waist off unceremoniously before arching over him to take his kiss. Even as I wind my tongue into his mouth, I am working at the ascot, pulling the knot free and sliding loose the strip of silk.

He is about to say something, but I don’t give him the chance. He isn’t fighting me, doesn’t start until I force him onto his stomach to yank off the jacket and fling it away, then pull his shirt back. The cuffs are still buttoned; this restricts his movement enough for me to trap one of his arms against my thigh and hold the other with my opposite leg. Tangled in the shirt, he struggles, realizes what I’m doing, and lets me tie his wrists together with the ascot. I make the knots tight and he exhales, his muscles relaxing. It is a sweet sound.

“I’ve missed this,” he admits, angling his face back to look at me.

“So have I.” I smile at him, brushing his hair behind his ear.

“Don’t hold back,” he advises.

“When have I ever?”

He rolls onto his side and looks up at me where I kneel next to him. I feel both worshipful and very dangerous and I can sense him drinking it in. I realize I am the one trembling now. My ache for him is so powerful it obliterates my senses. As Will described — associating. There is no world beyond this room.

He wants to be claimed and I want to claim him. I reach out to cup his cheek, my eyes feasting on all the marks I've already left on his body. So he knows, so I know, so the world knows: mine.

I whisper the pad of my thumb across his lower lip. I feel the quickening of his breath, I wonder if he knows my hands are shaking as well.

He props himself up on his elbow to be closer to me as I gently stroke his face, my thumb now finding the sweet hollow beneath his bottom lip. It is very soft. I hold his jaw now just to look at him. His impatience is obvious but he is doing his best to be good. I trail one finger beneath his chin and kiss him, simple and deceptively chaste, considering the situation: that he is naked on the floor with his wrists tied behind his back, pining to be ravished.

I feel the monster coil up in me. It strikes with a flash of teeth.

I shove Will flat on his back, never mind his arms are pinned beneath himself and the floor. Perched on his hips, I have an unobstructed view of him, and I lean closer, to kiss or bite I do not know, and neither does he. Will turns his face away with a little smirk; I will let him play his game of denial if he wishes. I have his throat, and that is more than enough. I kiss it hungrily, breathing great lungfuls of his scent. If he smelled good enough to eat before, it is doubly true now that his essence and the cologne mingle with the spicy remnants of dinner.

My hand closes over his shoulder, a possessive grip as I nuzzle down his neck and threaten it with my teeth. He tenses, waiting, but I can be unpredictable too. I sit back and tighten my thighs around him, working the side of my foot against the inner part of his calf to keep him still. I feel his gaze like a sensual touch as I toss off my robe and bend over him again, my hands splayed out on the floor on either side of his head.

"Tonight was perfect," I can't help but say, and he glows under my praise, eyes alight. "You were perfect. Will — it was everything."

Instead of shrugging off my compliment, unable to accept the accolades, he looks directly into my eyes. "Thank you," he says.

I run a hand through his hair and bend my elbows to come closer, bathed in his scent again. His arousal is heady, powerful, and I can smell his blood heating up, the musky sweetness of his perspiration as it beads on his forehead despite the cold room. I nose the line of his sternum and move in for a kiss he is ready to accept, then abruptly move my mouth to the side to kick a hot, wet line from his collarbone to the tender little place below his jaw. He makes a soft sound of assent and I can feel him trying to rut against me. I press the flesh of his neck between my teeth, gently at first, then with increasing force, and he pants, chest heaving.

I love him like this. Needy and desperate for me yet playfully pretending he isn't. I work my tongue against the other side of his neck now and even though it makes him moan he squirms under me, trying to move away from my lips.

I bite him to keep him in place and he cries out, a brief sound that rings sharply against the corners of the room. "Hannibal," he says, my name, just to say it. I move back and stretch my hand around his neck to hold him down, hovering my mouth over his but with tantalizing inches between us. He arches his spine and tries; I have to move my hand to his jaw, my fingers and thumb pressed into the curves of his face. My free fingertips tease his nipple, circling it until it stands even higher before delivering a brief pinch that makes him suck in a breath.

Enough; I will kiss him now, cradling the side of his head, moving my fingers in his hair. I catch his jaw again and he opens dutifully for me, admitting my tongue as it roams against his. "Say what you will," I murmur in between, "about the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, but I do miss the straitjackets, at least where you're concerned, Will."

He opens his mouth to say something but before he can, I take him by the shoulder and one arm, rising on my knees, and flip him onto his stomach. He lets out a laugh that rings with frustrated delight as he is pressed into the rug, unable to rise, as I settle over his lower back. I snake his belt from the abandoned trousers and fasten it above his elbows as tightly as I can before I hear the hissed intake of breath that signals the edge of pain. I test the hand hold; it will do nicely.

I move back and put my weight on my knees instead, surveying my domain. The curve of his back up into his gluteus muscles is something from Michelangelo. Looking at Will from this angle scarcely seems real. I am momentarily stunned, unable to think or move. That is, until he dares to turn back and tilt his chin up with a daring half-smile.

I grasp him roughly by the ankles and shove his legs open. I hear him emit a precious anticipatory moan into the carpet below. "Lovely," I murmur, my hand skimming along his inner thigh, starting just above the knee. My fingertips trace one of the twin rises and he trembles at my touch. He shifts against the floor, no doubt accommodating himself as he hardens. Already I can scarcely tolerate the press of my own arousal in my undergarment.

I hold the belt with one hand and search my bedside drawer with the other. I can flip the cap of the bottle open one handed. He inhales sharply as the cold lubricant drips into his crevice. I murmur an apology and make up for it by massaging his entrance with the tips of my first two fingers. This is a place I have not explored in some time and again, I am trembling with anticipation, sweat pricking my hairline even in the chill coming through the vent. His breathing shifts into an arrhythmic series of shallow and deep lungfuls of air. I touch him with cruel indecision, circling, then moving forward along the perineum, back again, then up to the base of his tailbone. He mutters delightful curses against the floor, using them instead of the word he means, which is *please.*

Everything is now very slick. I tease him again, almost penetrating, then abandoning the entrance again. He lets out a frustrated moan and, at last, begs for it.

Inside of him is hot and tight and perfect. I force myself to go slowly. He tries to back up against my hand but I hold him away with the belt around his elbows. “Easy now,” I say, like he is a skittish animal. This earns me another frustrated growl, but he relents and lets me set the pace. I am exploring, stretching in tiny increments, pausing every so often to let him adjust to me, relaxing into my hand.

He cannot maintain his patience and attempts to push my fingers on further. “No,” I scold him softly, draping my body over his now, cupping his chin in one hand and fingering him with the other, using my body weight to keep him pinned to the floor.

“ *Fuck* ,” is his response. I press the curve of his ear between my teeth for a moment and he tremors beneath me with a hitched breath. But he is learning. As I rise back to my knees, an inch at a time, he stays where I placed him. His reward is due. I find his prostate and stroke it and he tosses his head back, curls quivering, panting his breaths. Wrapping my free hand around the belt I haul him to his knees and continue my work. He is dripping already with arousal and it isn’t long before he orgasms internally, curling his head down and pressing his brow into the rug as he clenches around my fingers. It’s obvious he is unable to process complete thoughts — he instinctively calls on God, then tells me in a mad rush that he loves me.

Muttered prayers, curses, half formed words. I am pleasantly surprised by my own patience thus far, but now that I’ve given him a pleasure he hasn’t had in months, I will take one for myself. I lift and press the head against his stretched opening, and, as gently as I can, push my way inside. I use the leverage of the belt to ease him back until I am entirely contained.

Such cradled comfort, so warm and slick and tight. Penetrating him is exquisite relief after months and months of waiting. And now that I am here, I can’t be patient anymore. My pristine control over my body and emotions crumbles — as it always has when Will is concerned, and always will — and I thrust into him, hard, fast, driving deeper with each movement. I have him by the belt and his hip, fingers digging into his skin. The foreplay was so engaging I know I can’t last long. I let go of his hip and stroke him from the front now, in tandem with my movements.

We climax within seconds of one another, despite the months that have passed and the years before that.

I pull out slowly with a tender little sigh, still breathing heavily. He collapses onto one shoulder, head angling down onto the floor, flushed and damp all over. After a few needed moments of rest, rocked back on my heels, I unbuckle the belt. He exhales his relief.

“I’ll have to cut this.” Despite the ascot’s valiant work, Will has stretched it so much it is unwearable. I have only the tiniest regret as I replace the lube in the drawer and pull out my folding knife instead.

“Just leave it,” he suggests, still panting into the carpet.

“Don’t tempt me.” I push the crumpled shirt out of my way and cut him free, then ease the sleeves off and cast everything aside so we can lay together on the floor, naked and sweating and smeared with lubricant and body fluids and heaven. I curl him to me and envelop him

from behind, resting my head on the floor, my nose brushing his neck. There are so many things I want to say to him, and they flit from one side of my mind to the other, birds and bats in a darkened sky. I only have glimpses of my thoughts as they wheel and dive in shadow. Hunting. They are nocturnal.

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Will opened his eyes.

Hannibal's arms were around him, one stretched behind Will's head to be used as a makeshift pillow, the other clasped tightly around his midsection. The HVAC vent churned out frigid air above; Will shivered, despite the heavy, comforting warmth of Hannibal's embrace. He had a feeling that some time had passed, but didn't remember falling asleep. His mind had been a carousel of raptures, spinning like the corpse dancers in *Carnival of Souls* . Marguerite Lesko eating her son. Her tears. His sympathies that were so utterly convincing he almost fooled himself. Hannibal trying to teach him to use the sausage stuffer, laughing when the casing slipped out of his hand, making a lewd joke of his own for once. Hannibal's kiss, his touch, the exquisite feeling of being claimed and captured and owned and loved. The way the stars had looked so magnificently different now that his design was complete, his legacy hurled into the cosmos.

He turned in Hannibal's arms and snuggled in close. "I'm freezing," he murmured into Hannibal's chest hair.

Hannibal chuckled, running a hand across Will's cheek.

"I have carpet marks on my face, don't I?"

A gentle laugh. "You do."

Hannibal got up on his knees and pulled a blanket down from the bed, draping it over Will, then got to his feet. "Where are you going?" Will complained.

"To run a bath. Warm," Hannibal explained. "Then I'll adjust the thermostat."

"No," Will protested. "Stay here and be disgusting and sleep on the floor with me."

Hannibal offered him a loving smile and disappeared into the bathroom. Will could hear the water running, and before long, he was sitting in the enormous built-in soaking tub, leaning back against Hannibal's chest, breathing in the amber-scented bath oils.

Bed at last. Will pulled on one of Hannibal's silk pajama shirts that hung long, just skimming the base of his ass, and collapsed onto the mattress. Hannibal folded down the sheets and they came together in a warm, sweet-smelling bundle.

Will felt near sleep, but there was something barbed and edgy that lingered on his mind like a burr in a dog's coat. "Hannibal?"

"Yes, darling." Half-asleep murmur.

“Tonight, with the Leskos – you said, uh… you said we didn’t have any secrets between us.”

Will could feel a certain guarded rigidness invade Hannibal’s body against his own. “Yes?” This word sounded painfully conscious.

“I need to tell you something.”

Hannibal responded by holding him tighter and giving him a brief kiss, meant, Will thought, to reassure them both.

“While you were in the BSHCI,” Will said, his voice small but steady, “I slept with someone else. N-not just Molly.” Hannibal did not respond, so Will continued, sitting up on his elbow to look at Hannibal’s face, trying to read it, every extraneous mirror neuron toiling to read his reaction. “H-he was, um… a-an escort, I guess you’d say? A… professional.”

Hannibal’s brows lifted a half-inch. “You hired a sex worker, Will? While you were married?” There was a little tug on one corner of his mouth; of course he couldn’t help but find that amusing. It made Will blush.

“...yeah,” he admitted. “In Baltimore. Once when you were in Florence. And, um, the other time was when I was working the Dragon case.”

“Two different men?”

“N-no, just the one.”

Hannibal’s mild surprise broadened. “The same man, twice, with three years in between?”

“Yeah.” Will bit the inside of his lip. “Because… he, uhm…” He winced, not wanting to say the words, but knowing he had no other choice. “He looked a little bit like you,” he admitted in a tumbling rush of shameful words. “And he sort of, uh, sounded like you.”

Despite his best efforts, Will could not read Hannibal’s expression. “How was it?” he asked. The question was bland; he seemed only vaguely interested in Will’s answer.

“I mean… It wasn’t this.” Will put a hand on Hannibal’s chest, then raised it to his own. “Not in a million years.”

“Did your wife know?”

Will shook his head no. Hannibal’s smile cut deeper now, an exposed blade.

“Must have cost a pretty penny.”

“Y-yeah,” Will confirmed. Then, “So, um…”

“Did he treat you well?” Hannibal wanted to know.

“Yeah, he did.” Will nodded. “I thought, um, maybe I could… I don’t know. Not miss you as much if I…” He sighed out a frustrated breath. “But I couldn’t. It didn’t…”

They were quiet a moment. “Thank you for telling me.” Hannibal’s expression was still sphinxlike, hard to read, but Will didn’t sense any red flags. “I have something I’d like to tell you, as well.”

“Sure,” Will nodded down at him.

“It is a similar confession.”

Will nodded, trying to keep his expression neutral. God, the woman could be fucking dead and gone and still piss him the fuck off. “I figured you and Bedelia…”

“Yes.” Hannibal said it absently as if it was meaningless. “I assumed you knew. Why else would the two of you harbor that particular flavor of ill-will?”

“But you’re not talking about Bedelia.” A wave of unease washed up on the shores of his heart. Will felt the muscles of his throat and jaw undergo an instinctive tightening.

“No. I’m talking about the man I folded into a heart and left for you at the Cappella Palatina.”

Will felt his brows rise on his forehead. “He was the real Roman Fell’s teaching assistant. Anthony someone.”

“Antony Dimmond,” Hannibal corrected.

Will felt a dark, bitter jealousy rise up the back of his throat, despite what he’d just revealed, despite the fact that this Antony guy ended up skinned and twisted into human origami. “I met him the night I killed the Fells, introducing myself to him with another name.”

“In Paris?” Will considered the timeline based on the investigation Pazzi had shared with him. “At the publication party?”

Hannibal nodded, his hair feathering out where it created friction against the pillowcase.

Will waited for Hannibal to continue. Instead, he reached up and stroked Will’s face, an unfamiliar glaze of vulnerability to his features, the curve of his proud mouth.

“He looked like you,” Hannibal admitted at last. “I had a similar desire to use a proxy to forget you. In both cases, it seems, we failed.”

“Is that… why you killed him?”

“Yes. He came to Florence, and realized I was posing as his murdered colleague. Instead of going to the police, he offered to lend credibility to my new identity in exchange for being kept.”

Will leaned into Hannibal’s hand. “Kept…?”

“He wanted to have an affair. Be treated like a mistress, with his situation paid for.” Hannibal ran his fingers through Will’s hair, curling them behind his ear. “I realized I was fooling

myself. There was no replacement for you. I wanted you to know that. And so I made him into the embodiment of my broken heart."

Will kissed him then, with insistent, firm pressure. He hoped it tasted reassuring. When they parted lips, he dropped down in bed again. Hannibal slung an arm over his midsection and pressed his face into Will's neck. Will held onto his arm, staring up at the gathered mosquito netting if the canopy above them. "I don't know how to say that I wish things had been different," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Because I can't… explain which things exactly I would change, what might… have adjusted the outcome."

"I wish we hadn't injured one another. So violently, so many times." Hannibal spoke into Will's throat, but his words were blunt, as if it was obvious. Perhaps, to him, it was. Will should have given in sooner.

But Will couldn't bring himself to agree. Even though Hannibal was his future and the person he loved above all others.

Hannibal went on, "I'd selected another academic entirely to murder."

"Not Roman Fell?"

He felt Hannibal's scoffed laugh against the fine hairs at the nape of his neck. "No. Fell was less than respected amongst his peers. I had my work cut out for me improving his reputation. But plans changed." The final word hung heavily between them. "Initially I had selected Dr. Emile Fontaine from the Sorbonne. And his husband Pierre."

The silence was meaty, thick.

"You could have used his passport, Will — he looks just like you. We would have had to lighten your hair, but the texture was much the same."

"Hey." Will sat up again. Hannibal bent at the waist and they faced each other. "I love you," Will said. "And… *thank you* for the valentine."

Hannibal smiled, kissed him. "You're welcome, Will."

Season 4 Episode 10: Eleguá

Chapter Summary

Something is wrong with Will, but he won't tell Hannibal. The dreaded words "I'm fine..." All this as the island braces for a storm.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Hurricane Drunk” by Florence and the Machine

“No walls, can keep me protected
No sleep, nothing in between me and the rain
And you can't save me now
I'm in the grip of a hurricane
I'm going to blow myself away
I'm going out, I'm going to drink myself to death
And in the crowd, I see you with someone else
I brace myself, because I know it's going to hurt
But I like to think at least things can't get any worse
No home, I don't want shelter
No calm, nothing to keep me from the storm
And you can't hold me down
Because I belong to the hurricane
It's going to blow us all away
I'm going out, I'm going to drink myself to death
And in the crowd, I see you with someone else
I brace myself, because I know it's going to hurt
But I like to think at least things can't get any worse
I hope that you see me, because I'm staring at you
But when you look over, you look right through
Then you lean and kiss her on the head
And I never felt so alive, and so dead
I'm going out, I'm going to drink myself to death
And in the crowd, I see you with someone else
I brace myself, because I know it's going to hurt
I'm going out...
I'm going out, I'm going to drink myself to death
And in the crowd, I see you with someone else
I brace myself, because I know it's going to hurt
I'm going out
I'm going out
I'm going out

I'm going out
I'm going out”

For the first time since Will came back to his body, woke up, as it were, here in Cuba, I am worried about him. For the past two days, he has been distant, preoccupied, and agitated, all bristling fur and raised hackles and throaty growls. I haven’t seen him this way since his days working for Jack Crawford, losing himself in the minds of murderers and victims, battling encephalitis and insecurity. It would not be so alarming if, a mere three days ago, he hadn’t seized every opportunity possible to tell me how happy he was. How much he loved me.

The Lesko design is complete. And yes, Jack and Alana are playing their games, but that is to be expected. If they didn’t scheme, I’d feel the needle-sting of their indifference. A deliberate slight, a bruise to the ego. I know Will doesn’t feel the same way, but I had thought him resigned to the idea that we haven’t seen the last of our old lives in Baltimore. Wasn’t it he who said, in so many words, that whatever we faced, we would face together?

Whatever he is facing now, he bears it alone, leaving me barren and helpless. I have asked, and, as of yet, he has refused to tell me, using the infuriating phrase, “I’m fine,” over and over.

And we have had a quarrel, the first one in a long time. Conflict is a normal part of every relationship, but I am angry to be at a constant disadvantage. He is hiding something from me.

It happened yesterday when Diego and I arrived at the dock to find Will waiting for us, ready to unload the supplies we’d secured in Havana. The generator was heavy enough that all three of us were needed to haul it ashore and onto the waiting cart. It took over an hour to transport everything to the mansion; gas canisters, extension cords, non-perishable food, bottled water, supplies for the dogs, extra diapers for the baby, plywood, nails. For some reason, Will had also insisted on a fire ax – the best I could do was something for cutting wood. At last, Diego departed, and we rested a moment on the staircase, Will dragging his sleeve over his brow, dampening it with sweat.

I could feel it, the cloud hanging over him, even after finishing the job, securing our preparations. “Will,” I say, taking his damp hand in mine. “You know what I’m going to ask you.”

“Do you *want* something to be wrong?” Will’s voice is abrasive, echoing in all the wrong corners of the marble foyer. “Do you want me to make something up?”

“No need to fabricate what already exists.”

He pulls his hand out of my grasp and cradles his head in his palms for a moment. “All right,” he says, and my blood turns cold. I knew, in those two words, that he was moments

away from saying something just to hurt me. “I don’t like what you did to Georgia Madchen.”

“Georgia Madchen…?”

Will gets to his feet. “Don’t pretend you don’t remember who she was.” This sounds like a threat.

I swallow down my immediate retort. I must respond, not react. “The girl with Cotard’s Syndrome.”

“That you burned alive.”

The removal of her grounding bracelet and the seduction of a plastic comb, yes, I remember. I watch him pace, shoulders hunched, his mouth pressed down into an unbecoming line. There are many things I could say, and so I consider them carefully, one at a time.

Her treatment gave her back some clarity. It wouldn’t be long before she remembered my face and what I did to Dr. Sutcliffe.

You said yourself that her best case scenario was receiving treatment and remembering what she did to her friend. Carving off her face. You told me she was doomed.

She had a debilitating mental illness. Her own family thought that dead was better. What I did was a mercy.

Burning alive with enough accellerant only hurts for a moment, darling. Once the skin has burned away, and the nerve endings with it, the rest is painless.

I decide to say nothing. Will has had plenty of time to grapple with this death, and this is the first time he’s brought it up in five years. This anger is about something else entirely; I knew then I must discover the true cause. On my own, since Will has inexplicably decided that we are, in fact, keeping secrets from one another.

“Listen.” His voice is shaky, but bitterly furious. “Georgia Madchen was one of the most *vulnerable* people I ever met. She had *nothing* . In and out of mental institutions, living on the street – sh-sh-she couldn’t see the faces of the people she loved, Hannibal, they were all featureless m-monsters to her! Anyone who tried to help her – she was… utterly alone. Walking through the world like she was dead. A ghost – lonely, and-and *desperate*... ! Failed by the system, *betrayed* by her own brain, responsible for the death of her best friend… no future just… fucking… *managing expectations* !” He’s raised his voice now. I have not heard this particular tone since he used it to say, *don’t lie to me!*

She was not flesh, but light and air and color, I want to say.

Isn’t that what it is to be alive?

I nod, just the tiniest tilt of my head, so he knows that I am listening. If he notices, he makes no indication. He is rubbing his forearm over his eyes. “And on top of all of that,” he

murmurs, his voice thick. “You burned her alive. Gave her one last moment of complete and utter terror. Let her watch as her skin… melted off her fucking bones until her eyes burst–”

“Will.” I can’t help but say his name. I am desperate to go to him but I am terrified to move, terrified of what he will say next. I catch movement in the open front door. Chiyoh, alerted by raised voices. I lock eyes with her and shake my head. She withdraws, hoisting the gun over her shoulder as she goes.

“Never again.” He is cold once more, his eyes cleared of tears. “We aren’t doing something like that ever again. Not to someone who never had a chance, who had nothing but suffering, who everyone abandoned. *Never* .” He swallows, raises his chin, though he trembles. He is daring me to disagree, or to defend myself. Spoiling for a fight.

“I understand,” is all I say. And I do. I suppose from Will’s perspective, what I did was cruel. I have my justifications – it had to look like an accident, and was necessary in that she was likely going to remember Sutcliffe’s murder – but they don’t matter to him, not now. All he can see is the excess cruelty visited on someone who had already had her share of it, thanks to biology and circumstance.

“Good.” He walks out. I stand up and go to the door, watching him disappear into the cabana house.

That was yesterday morning, and we haven’t spoken since. It is not that he hasn’t acknowledged my existence – this isn’t a childish silent treatment – but beyond a few words of greeting and comments about the weather, we have not communicated anything of importance. He has kept himself busy, pausing only to eat brief meals standing at the kitchen counter. There are so many windows to secure – all three homes – and shutters to latch, a generator to tune up, doors to reinforce, flashlights to test. He throws himself wholeheartedly into these preparations, the radio on constantly in the background with the latest forecasts. He has to stop from time to time and listen intently, as they are in Spanish.

I speak privately with Magdaly. I want to know if we should be prepared to evacuate, if we should, as Will initially suggested, go to the mainland. I am loath to do this – it provides an opportunity for us to be recognized. And now that Jack is looking, we must be clever.

She seems unconcerned. She understands his desire to prepare, and appreciates the extra care taken to ensure the safety of her children. But, she says, “It will not be more than a big rain. Some wind. Lose power, could be awhile.”

I trust her judgment – she’s lived on this island her whole life. I try to relay this information to Will, but he is only half-listening. Not even half – a smaller fraction, examining the electric box on the side of the mansion. “Do we have fire extinguishers?” is what he says when I finish speaking.

“Will,” I say. I am doing my best to be patient, but I can feel my resolve fraying. He can’t treat me like this; I know he loves me and he knows I love him. It’s out in the open, clear as day – have I ever given him reason to doubt that I want to provide my undying support? “Is there something you fear? If you tell me specifically–”

“I’m an old hand at fear,” he says, shutting the electrical box and walking away, back down the garden path.

Hard to believe a week ago we were reminiscing about Alana’s rejection of Will based on his instability, how everyone at the BSU gave him sympathy, pity even, but never empathy. He’d expressed a continued desire to bring Jack Crawford a reckoning. “You know what he said about you, darling, when you were losing time? ‘He’ll survive what I put him through and find a way back to himself.’”

“He wasn’t wrong,” Will said then. “I did. Through you.”

How, then, could he say those words to me, and in mere days, slam his metaphorical door in my face?

The storm is slated to arrive this afternoon. I make a few calls to check in on my patients and let them know I will be available as soon as the storm passes, provided Diego can get me to the mainland. As I leave the library, I run into Will, who is carrying the ax. “Kinda small,” he says, hefting it. I almost wonder if he plans to murder me with it. “Guess it’ll have to do.”

I step toward him with the intention of attention, giving and receiving a kiss, but he brushes past me, headed down the hall. I watch him yank open the attic door and hear his steps as he clatters up to the top floor of the mansion. I follow.

He is moving around sheeted furniture, clearing a path to the edge of the stifling space, leaving footprints in the dust. At last, he makes his way to where he can touch the sloped ceiling. He examines the exposed beams, nods, then sets the ax within reach on a nearby chair, resting it on the dust cover.

“Will,” I try.

“Trust me.” He says it grimly. “You need an ax in the attic.”

I am too baffled to stop him as he squeezes past me and bangs down the stairs and outside again. I am swept further into worry when a thought surfaces; what if his encephalitis is back?

No. I would be able to smell it. And all I can smell on Will, when he lets me get close enough to him, is fear, acrid and tangy and a stark deviation from his usual scent these days. What on earth is he so afraid of?

The time comes, or, rather, will be here within a few hours. The winds have shifted and there is a building pressure in the atmosphere. Will orders us inside, all of us, Magdaly and her children, Chiyoh, and the dogs. He bolts the main door of the mansion shut. It is very dark inside, as all the windows are covered. Will flips on a few lights and insists we take shelter in the innermost room of the lowest floor.

This room was built to act as a small movie theater, and, as such, there are no windows. One end of the space has red velvet curtains that can be pulled aside to reveal a screen, and a projector booth in the back. The projector itself is from another era, but Will, prepared in all

things, has made sure it will work for us, as long as the power stays on. “We have to keep Alejandra distracted,” he’d said. I wonder if he doesn’t mean himself – I caught him speaking with her that morning, as if he was trying to calm her, telling her it was just a storm and there was nothing to worry about, that he wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Her response: “I know.” Shrugged her shoulders, skipped away.

The film library is small but varied; there are classics of Cuban post-revolution cinema: *Lucía* and *Memorias del Subdesarrollo,* as well as American fare from the 1940s and ‘50s. *Gaslight, Carnival of Souls, Arsenic and Old Lace, Dumbo, Pinocchio, Double Indemnity, the Wolfman, It’s a Wonderful Life, Dead Reckoning.* I begin one of the animated films and Alejandra is more than happy to plop into a dusty but deeply cushioned armchair to watch. Chiyoh reads in the corner, the gun leaning against the wall next to her. I sit with Will on a small sofa, red to match the curtains. This is only after he has checked and rechecked our supplies and made sure he has a flashlight for each of us. If Magdaly would permit it, I believe he would give one to the baby.

I do not watch the film. I watch him, and I make no attempt to hide my study. He has a smaller radio with him now, battery powered, or by hand crank of those fail. There is a little plastic ear piece and he is listening, lips pressed white, moving along the dial trying to find a weather report he can understand.

He doesn’t notice when I stand. I nod to Chiyoh and she motions to the gun. I shake my head. She puts down her book and follows me back out into the foyer. I explain what I need, and we are finished assembling and placing the items within 20 minutes. From what I can tell, it is raining outside, but no harder than the occasional thunderstorms we often endure.

Will glares at me when as I reclaim my seat, the radio clenched in his hand against the arm of the sofa. “Where were you?” he demands, quiet but sharp-edged.

“Seeing to some final preparations,” I say.

“There weren’t any more preparations,” he says as the children’s movie plays in the background. “Shouldn’t be near the windows,” he reminds me. “Even if they’re shuttered, okay?”

The film is nearing its end when, at last, we can hear the wind and the rain, even in this interior, windowless room. And what an unfathomable effect it has on Will. He breaks out in a sweat. I notice a change in his breathing that only becomes more evident as the wind makes the old house shift and crackle on its foundations. We hear a shutter has come loose; it is slamming into the side of the structure, arrhythmic auditory torture for him, I expect. He leans his elbows on his knees and rubs his face, then sits back and closes his eyes for a moment. They fly open when the shutter impacts the side of the house with a particularly ominous crack.

Still, Alejandra is watching the movie, eating one of the pre-packaged protein bars Will insisted I bring home. Magdaly is breastfeeding, as is Luz, and Chiyoh turns a page in her book, glancing up at me from time to time.

I grasp Will's hand, in solidarity, but also to turn his wrist and take his pulse, glancing at my watch. It is close to a hundred beats per minute, even after sitting this long.

"Will," I can't help but try again. "Please. Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm fine," he insists, though his voice is breathy and I can feel him shaking. As he perspires, the tang of his fear grows stronger by the minute, invading my nose. "Once this is over, I'll be fine." He shakes his head. "Stupid. It was so long ago." He fixes his eyes on the movie screen and pretends to watch the little puppet's creator rejoice as, at last, the thing he has made in his image, his golem, has turned to flesh. I assume the puppet has also given up immortality, but it seems a small price to pay to be able to lie.

I leave him reluctantly to change the film reel. Alejandra is demanding to watch it over again, and I am happy to oblige if it keeps her quiet. I cannot afford a distraction for Will or for myself; something fragile and tenuous is in danger and I must protect it.

Just as I return, there is a crack from outside, followed by a thump. I surmise that one of the palm trees on the edge of the garden has fallen over. You would think the roof was being torn from the house, the foundation filling with floodwater, the way Will is practically panting, his pupils dilated, skin clammy. I can feel his trepidation as if it emanated from myself in nauseating waves. I entertain the wild thought that Will's extraneous neurons can *push* emotions at other people instead of allowing him to merely receive.

Enough.

Enough .

I stand. "Come with me." I speak softly, but in no uncertain terms. This is an order, not a request.

"This is the safest–"

"Will," I warn. "I won't ask again."

He looks angry, then desperate. He scans the room, checking on the dogs and Magdaly's family before standing to follow me out the door, Chiyoh watching us every step of the way.

I close the door to the little cinema behind us. It is only a few steps down a hall and through another door. We are back in the foyer.

I take his hand. It shakes, and he winces as we hear another crack from outside, though it is distant and likely at the edge of the property. Beneath the staircase is a cupboard; up until very recently it stored cleaning supplies. There are a few built-in shelves, a hanging bulb, and the undersides of the stairs are visible.

On the floor is a mattress, stolen from an unoccupied bedroom, a simple sheet covering it. Chiyoh and I gathered as many blankets and pillows as we could find, and I arranged them into what I hope is a welcoming nest in this little niche. On the shelves I've placed an electric lantern, flashlights, my doctor's bag, and some means of refreshment.

“Lie down.” Still an order, but I am gentle; with Will, one often catches him with honey, not vinegar.

“Shouldn’t we stay with the… with Magdaly and the kids–”

“Chiyoh is more than capable of handling any type of emergency, wouldn’t you agree?”

Still, he resists. “Has she ever been through a hurricane before?”

“Magdaly has experience enough for all of us.” If he continues to refuse, I will have to try other routes.

“But-”

“Will.” I take him by the wrist and the fabric of his shirt. His arm I squeeze with enough pressure for him to know that I am serious. “Don’t make me use force. I don’t want to hurt you. I’m trying to help you.” I relax my grip and kiss his forehead. “ *Please* .”

At last he relents. We step into the cupboard and I close the door behind us with a sound of finality. I take him in my arms and coax him down onto the mattress. He is still coiled everywhere, full of aching tension. Once I have him down, I sit up and lift his foot to unlace his shoes. “What if we–”

I throw a glance over my shoulder and he closes his mouth, lets me remove them and my own. Next, I pour a hefty amount of whiskey into a glass and hand it to him.

“I need to– if something hap… happens.”

“Drink the whiskey,” I say, lifting a knee and resting my elbow on it. “Or I will give you an injection of sodium amytal.”

“What?” His word is a sharp, savage bark.

“Drink, or I will inject you with sodium amytal,” I repeat.

“You’re serious — Hannibal, we’re in the middle of a major storm—“

I reach down my bag and open it, pulling out the syringe and bottle.

“Jesus, all right, for fuck’s sake!” Will bolts down the liquor. I take the glass from him as he wipes his lips and refill it, and serve myself one as well. I need it after dealing with him these past few days.

“Come here.” I back myself up against the wall, supported by the mound of pillows, and beckon him closer. I do not let my words ring as optional. He hesitates, then sighs, empties his glass again, and joins me. I fold him back against my chest, his head resting on my pectoralis major below the rise of my clavicle, my legs spread. And I hold him, tenderly and then tighter, constricting my arm around his chest, pressing in with my thighs, my other hand tracing his damp hair back from his clammy forehead.

The wonderful way he at last relaxes and all but melts against me is so precious it is almost worth the days of turmoil. I pause to drink, and he does the same. I can't remember the last time he ate, so the alcohol takes a near-immediate effect. I press my face into his hair and smell him, his fear and pain, his own scent far beneath these layers of anguish and adrenaline-sweat. "Will," I whisper against his curls. That is all. He knows what I want. When he doesn't respond, I add, "Please."

He trembles. "It makes it worse," he blurts. "Have-have you ever been in a place where… you're, uhm, barely holding it together and then someone — shows genuine concern and-and you just *lose it* ? A little kindness and all the sudden you've lost your grip and just…" he takes a watery breath that sounds like the rattle of tears. "I didn't want to break down. Not in front of the family and not in front of you. I needed to get the house ready. I didn't h-have time to fall apart, okay?"

I want to chastise him for keeping things from me. I want to demand answers, shake them free if I have to. But I wait and I watch him finish his glass, leaning to set it on the shelf before nearly collapsing back into my arms. "Still don't have time," he murmurs. "Shouldn't be drinking or be separated f-from Magdaly and—"

"Do you trust me, Will?"

He turns to look at me. There. That hesitation. "Yes," he says, in spite of it.

"Then listen to me." I shift us down so we are stretched out on the mattress, his face folded between my hands. "This storm is not going to hit us directly."

"You don't know that," he argues immediately. "All the predictive models they use are practically useless now because of climate change—"

He stops talking, blessedly, when I kiss him into silence. He is unresponsive for a few moments before melting back into me again. "Even if it does, we are fully prepared. There is nothing we can do but wait. And while we wait, you are going to tell me what's the matter. Even if you fall apart. If you trust me, then you know I will be there on my knees to pick up the pieces."

"Mended with gold," he murmurs before I kiss him again, tasting whiskey.

"Yes." I pull him into my arms and rest his head on my chest where he doesn't have to make eye contact. It is easier this way for him to be honest with me. "Speak, Will."

"I don't like this," he blurts. "I thought I could handle it – the storm – and I can't, it's… just a rotating fucking horror show in my head and I'm… seeing things I haven't seen in years – God, it's been almost *fifteen* years."

I count backward in my head. Will would have been thirty.

"What are you seeing?" I comb my fingers through his hair with the gentlest of fingertips.

“Bodies,” he says. “Bodies floating in the water. All those old folks in the care center – they just left them – it was so hot, their hearts just gave out. The worst was the people who made it to the attic and still drowned. That’s why you have to have an ax. You can break your way out if you have an ax in the attic.” He swallows and takes a few shallow breaths. I continue my rhythmic stroking of his hair, my other arm clasped tightly around him as he speaks. He has his hand on my chest, my shirt balled up in his fist. “And those people on the bridge – they just shot them – unarmed and running away.”

I sit up to give him another drink, and he bolts it down without hesitation. “You were in New Orleans during the hurricane in 2005,” I reason, based on the information he’s given me. I take special care to keep my voice even and soft, a therapist's voice. I am loath to use it with him, but he needs it now.

He nods miserably and I embrace him again. My words have provided a framework and allow him to tell me a more coherent narrative. “I was working homicide. Third year,” he tells me. “FEMA botched the response, but the police misconduct was worse. M-most of the cops evacuated and they wouldn’t come back after the storm was over. Those of us who stayed – we didn’t have anything… vehicles were under water, there was no dispatch, no radio – first responders just… found each other and w-we ran search and rescue. Non stop, 24-hour shifts, sleep and eat when you could.

“It was a nightmare and you couldn’t wake up. And some of the cops just s-snapped. About a week later the department got a call that civilians were taking pot shots at police from Danziger Bridge. Six officers rolled up in a Budget rental truck with f-fucking assault rifles… they shot into a group of unarmed people just… just walking across the bridge to buy some supplies, or trying to get back home. My partner and I responded to the scene after it was all over and… a woman’s arm was just laying there on the ground and this kid – seventeen years old – shot in the back.

“Their design was shoot first, ask questions later, and cover everything up if needed – which is what they did. And I-I could see it, as *ugly* as it was, I could empathize with them. But the storm? The storm didn’t have a design. It was just *suffering* . And the people who endured the most were the people who didn’t have anything to begin with. Black folks living in the 9th Ward. The elderly and the sick. The people who didn’t have the means or the mobility to evacuate. All I could feel… for *months*... was the city suffering. All that pain with no design. No rhyme or reason.”

“An act of God.” I do not realize I have spoken aloud until it is too late. I shut my mouth, hoping I have not startled him back into silence.

Will seems to consider my words. He sighs. “A few months later I was running down leads in a murder case in Algiers, and I found the suspect holed up in his cousin’s apartment. He came after me with a knife.” Will takes a shaky breath. “Even as I drew my gun I knew I wasn’t gonna use it. How could I? How could I bring… more suffering, more death?” He sighs, swallows hard. “I just sort of… tried to fight but… I let him stab me. That’s what it came down to.”

“You wanted a way out,” I suggest, fingering the place on his back where the blade went in, just over his rotator cuff. “A reason not to stay as the city recovered from the storm. The

injury allowed that."

He nods. "I left. I came up north and I went back to school, wrote my monograph, and started working at Quantico. Then… you."

It pleases me that he defines eras of time in his life through my role in it. I think of my own timeline the same way.

"When my dad and I lived down south, w-we went through hurricane season like everybody else – I was always more… fascinated than frightened. But this is my first… since Katrina. And I really thought…" He smiles ruefully, "that it wasn't going to affect me, because it'd been so long. And I've seen death a million different ways since. So *much* between then and now. I'm different, and…"

"I see the remnants of a connection in your mind," I comment, half to myself, as I trace the curve of his ear. "The people victimized by the storm were the population's most vulnerable. Societal systems catastrophically failed and put those in the most danger of harm at an even greater risk." He raises his head to look at me, nods. "And this," I say, "made you think of Georgia Madchen."

He sits up, passing his hand over his face. When he looks at me again, he is bleary-eyed, exhausted. "I meant what I said. But not how I said it."

My heart drops, then snarls. I expected an understanding of my motivations. I expected his empathy. I expected him to understand that God is arbitrarily cruel, as He was to the vulnerable residents of New Orleans, and are we not made in his image?

It is my turn to breathe and calm myself. "We hunt and kill together," I say, forcing back any remnants of anger. "That means we must agree on our prey."

He nods, heaves another great sigh as I tighten my grip, and shifts to rest his ear over my heart. "I was a real piece of shit the last few days, huh?"

"Not the exact wording I'd select, but the sentiment rings true." I stroke his hair again. "You were difficult. Without enough information our brains write our own story to fill in the missing pieces. I composed several scenarios where you were unhappy with me." *Didn't love me anymore,* I think but do not say.

"I thought I could talk about it after. I didn't have time to… I don't know. Have a breakdown. But now that I've told you… everything could have been so much easier if I'd just said something."

He's learned his lesson, then. We lay in silence for a while, but he still tenses up every time the wind outside buffets the house with a particularly robust gust. Eventually he sits up and kisses me, slinging a leg over my hips and working my shirt buttons loose. "Is this your method of apology?" I ask in the spaces in between kisses. I would find it physically gratifying, to be sure, but I do not want him to presume that sex will patch things up entirely.

“No,” he says, pausing to push my shirt open and run his hand through the hair on my chest. “I know this won’t magically make things right, but… uhm, I could use a distraction.” He smiles down at me. “If you’re moaning loud enough I can’t hear the storm. So don’t hold back.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Smiling for what seems to be the first time in days, Will undresses me and sets my clothing aside. He takes his time, leaning over to kiss me, winding his lips down my neck and back up again. His hand strokes the tender flesh just below my navel, light, teasing traces that make me shiver despite the warmth of our little space. Closes those alluring petal lips around my nipple, sucking, then easing back to massage with his tongue, graze with his teeth while stroking my inner thigh, working his way closer and closer to the center.

His fingers curl around the curve of my backside where it is pressed into the mattress, then skim into my crevice, feeling out my anatomy, reading its shapes and contours like braille. I am plunged immediately into a ravenous desire. There is no transition period; I’m almost embarrassed by it. But I remember what Will said, and make my situation clear through vocalization. He smiles again, this time a mischievous little thing, and drops his head to my navel to taste the skin he’d been touching while he fondles the ring of my entrance and my perineum, massaging the prostate through the flesh here.

Devious creature. He is putting his mouth everywhere but on my cock, licking my thighs, working his tongue into each niche. The wet muscle of his mouth is a holy miracle and I am not exaggerating the sounds I make – he is earning them indeed. He hums appreciation deep in his throat, and I see him shifting on his knees, a hand tugging at his inseam, my desire activating his, which in turn feeds mine as well. Uroboros.

He takes my ankles and repositions me to give himself better access. I am aching for his mouth, the warmth and treasure of tongue and pressure and suction, but he doesn’t give it to me, focusing solely on everything else. So intimate, these hidden areas of the body, the centers of shame so few dare explore. Will is devouring them voraciously.

As far as the apology I’m owed, I suppose this might suffice.

Everything is thoroughly wet now. Will sits back and wipes his chin with his hand, smirking at me as I lift my shirt sleeve to my forehead, blotting the sweat, trying to catch my breath. I am painfully hard and if he keeps this up, I will have to resort to begging him for release.

He unzips my black bag and roots around in it. “Thought so,” he teases, pulling out an unadorned, clinical-looking tube of lubricant. Many of my current clients are older men, and I do perform prostate exams; catching cancer early is vital, of course. “Nothing fancy, but…” He unscrews the lid and deposits a generous amount on his fingertips.

“Using the products we prefer in my professional interactions wouldn’t do.” I say this with a little laugh that twists into a gasp as he touches me with slicked fingers. He circles and massages, kisses me, leans back to, I believe, watch me dig my fingers into the mattress and a nearby pillow, enjoying my frustration as much as I enjoy his.

Will has become a student of fingering, and he takes his work very seriously, not confident enough in his skills to multi—

Apparently I was mistaken. He can fellate me and stroke my prostate at the same time. Well done, darling. His labors produce a quick but powerful result that inspires more sounds from me that drown out the roar of the storm. Despite my release and labored breaths, he continues to stretch me, his other hand on my chest, holding me flat on my back.

"Now?" His voice has gone from playful to begging.

I nod and he all but rips open his pants to gather up his cock and push it in me. My breath catches — it's been too long since Will has penetrated me, and I have missed cradling him within, the closest embrace humanly possible. He is doing his best to be gentle, to let me adjust, but I care nothing for any discomfort. I put my heel on the rounded curve of his ass and flex my thigh to pull him closer. He slides an arm under my raised knee and gives into my demands.

There are no words for his beauty at this angle, arching over me, thrusting, breathing hard, blushing, intermittently squeezing his eyes shut and looking down at me with a kind of angelic adoration. I put a hand on the side of his face, drag it back through his hair. He turns his chin and kisses my palm and I slide my first two fingers into his mouth for a succulent moment or two. Bending closer now, so I can press myself into his belly as we move. I feel my leg muscles contracting as I edge up to the cliff once more, delighting in the sensation of fullness, of enveloping and holding him, of complete intimacy.

In a sudden, maddening moment he pulls out. I feel his absence, an immediate ache. Apparently he was not satisfied with the amount of oral stimulation before. He lifts me aside and his tongue is insistent again against the first ring of muscle, despite the clinical lubricant that I can't imagine offers much in the way of taste. My voice echoes in the enclosed space and I alternate between stroking and pulling his dark curls as they move between my legs. I marvel at his talent and persistence. He's never been so insatiable before. I wonder how he learned to do this — was it through receiving from me? Will is a quick study. Or…

Or he had practice with someone else.

Against my better angels, my mind suggests that this was how Will used to pleasure his wife. Or the sex worker that looked like me.

Before I am completely aware of what I have done, he is beneath me, staring up at me with those eyes, capturing me with their inhuman beauty. "Stay down," I warn him.

He chuckles, half-smiles in disbelief. "Couldn't just lay back and let me…?"

I answer his partially formed question by sweeping his clothing the rest of the way off and yanking his shirt over his head. A precious moment to savor as I visually grope his bent legs, the bare curve where it eases up from thigh to buttock. Such beautiful appendages; shapely with muscle, tendon, bone somehow arranged in a way that never fails to please me when I look at them, feel them, kiss his inner thighs as I am now, unable to resist them. Equally magnetic are his calves that I caress and grip as I please.

“I was in the middle of something,” he scolds me as lick his nipple, then draw my tongue up his neck and around the corner of his jaw. The pad of my thumb rests just below his lower lip, holding him in place to be kissed as I want to kiss him.

I prop myself up on one hand and touch his face with the other, cupping his cheek. He opens his mouth to speak again, protest, maybe, and I shut him up. A tongue in the mouth makes an effective gag.

He lifts his chin to break the kiss, inhaling sharply as I pinch the rise of his clavicle between my teeth. “Why did you– w-wasn’t it good..?”

“Too good.” I almost snarl the words.

He snares my shoulders with his hands and pushes me up and away. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

I respond by rocking back on my heels and grabbing him around the ankle. I yank back roughly, using my greater weight, and he slides off of the pillows, flat on his back now, a surprised grunt working between his lips. “Hannibal–?” He wants an answer to his question and turns his head away as I attempt to kiss him. I settle for his neck – and it is hardly settling, but he pushes back, and nearly slides out from beneath me. “Why–”

He can’t get a grip on me, and I catch his wrist with one hand and use the other arm and my thighs to flip him onto his stomach. I bend his arm behind his back and plant my palm on the back of his head, pressing his face into the mattress. He turns his face to the side to breathe and curse and then, when I lean over him, grinding against the cleft of his backside, muffle his moan into the bed.

“Too good,” I repeat, a threatening growl in his ear. “You must have had some practice.”

He laughs. It seems impossible that he hasn’t sensed my very real jealousy. This is not just dirty talk, though it is very tempting to call him a whore.

What he says next convinces me that, yes, he understands perfectly. And he wants to add fuel to the fire. “Come to think of it, Margo said something similar when I ate her out.”

I press my chest into his back and take his ear between my teeth, nipping before I lick the upper curve. Into it I whisper a litany of degradation in several languages. Where the filth comes from I cannot tell, but it has an interesting effect on Will. He leans into it, a little smirk playing at the corners of his mouth, glowing as if I was complimenting him instead. Fascinating indeed.

“Get on your knees.” This is not a suggestion, not a request. Something firmer than an order. I kneel behind him as he obeys and retrieve the lubricant. Before opening it, I roughly reposition him – head down, pressed into his folded arms. I warn him, as I grip a handful of backside, that his knees and elbows will not leave the bed, or there will be consequences. Though I can tell by the curve of his cheek he is smiling, tempted, I’m sure, to discover what those consequences might be. Still, he does as he’s told.

My slicked fingers circle his entrance before I send one in. He had very little time to prepare and clenches in surprise. I warn him to relax, or this will not be pleasant. He does as he's told readily enough, and it is his turn to make enough noise with his pleasure to drown out the storm. I find the rise of his prostate and greet it with my fingertip.

I know it won't be enough, but I want to hear him say it. I watch his frustration grow as I work, a teasingly slow and inefficient touch. "More," he begs at last. "Please, I can't…"

"Head down," I warn him, but because he has asked, I give him what he wants. When have I been able to deny him? Another finger. He rocks back against my hand. As I brush the target, then begin the stimulation, he lifts his head again, tossing it back, emitting the most precious little begging sounds I think I've ever heard come out of his mouth.

Perhaps now he will associate hurricanes with something else entirely.

He's on his hands now. "No." I grip him by the back of the neck with my free hand, arm arced along his spine, and lean my weight against him. He's strong, but in this position and with my fingers in him he can't fight me.

Doesn't want to. He is hard and dripping and poised to finish, each gasping breath translating his need, each wordless exhalation laden with meaning. *Please, please, please.*

He whines out a, "No…" when I slide my fingers out. He should know by now to trust me, that he will have what he wants in the end. I lift myself and press the head into him. He sighs in relief, then gasps when I take him by the hips and rock him back, forcing him to take it all. I have been desensitized by all of the previous attention and I can go for some time before finishing if I'm mindful.

He comes purely internally. It is a beautiful sight. The wind is inaudible — the hedonistic sounds of flesh hitting flesh and our voiced passion drown everything out. I put my hand on his length and keep thrusting, pressing him through my grip as our hips move, my other hand snarled in his hair. I feel him tensing to finish and I let myself fall over the edge.

Off the cliff together again.

Will crumples onto the mattress, panting. I gather him to me, and pull a thin blanket over us, just for decorum's sake, should someone come knocking. We are a tangled mess of sweat, various body fluids, and medical grade lubricant, now tacky against our skin. I revel in it, twining myself to him, enveloping him from behind.

I can't smell his fear anymore. There is only the scent of my beloved all over my body, on every inch of bedding.

Despite the howl of the wind, Will is asleep within minutes, before I have recovered enough to form a sentence. I smile into his hair and close my eyes as well. In the morning, I'll ask him to finish what he started, and do my best not to interrupt.

Author's note: If you want to find out what happens the next morning, follow me on Twitter @DBMars33, I will post a short update to this chapter that is only on twitter!

Season 4 Episode 11: Eledá

Chapter Summary

> “You’ll never see him again,” she threatens me now. “They’re on their way to collect him. And then they’ll come for you.”

Chapter Notes

> Companion Song: “Biggy” – Warpaint
>
> “Blue
>
> The color of my native skin
>
> Colored into a color never seen
>
> A sun so full arises
>
> True feeling runs across my chest
>
> In my silence, there's a color I've never see
>
> The sunrise is finding me
>
> And the world starts spinning
>
> Dance above the clouds
>
> Hold my world to something
>
> Let it make a sound
>
> I found it, moved it alone
>
> Her heart, her heart, her heart
>
> Believe in love
>
> Blue, the color of my native skin
>
> Caught up between myself

But it's drawing me

Into the color you're making

There's a world that I'll never see

Shattered fools in memory

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

Heat of a lover

(Heat of a lover)

(Heat of a lover)”

Since the Dragon and the Fall, Will’s unpredictability has presented itself in different ways. It once manifested as indecision, of being pulled in two directions, unable to stand firmly in one place or another. Now, it has gradually become something else entirely, and I cherish it more than I thought was possible.

This morning, for instance, I did not see him on the back deck of the cabana house as I went out for my swim, or when I returned. The dog and her puppies were outside on the veranda, but the house itself was quiet. I went to my rooms to perform my morning rituals, and what do I find? Will was laying in wait for me in the washroom – I stepped in to hang up my bathing suit and he was there, wearing one of my robes. He pushed the door shut and backed me up against it, falling to his knees.

I cannot suppress the moan of deep satisfaction as he draws me between his lips. Just coming out of the ocean, I’ve found, makes me extremely sensitive, the cool damp of being wet and air-drying replaced by the hot, sultry environment of Will’s mouth, his ardent tongue working busily to bring me pleasure. I can’t stop my hand from traveling through his hair to the back of his head. I want to go deeper than he is likely comfortable with, but this is not a time to be unpredictable. It is not my desire to be selfish or uncommunicative.

Will reads my cue, though, and gives his best effort. I finish within moments, spurred on by his enthusiasm and the way his throat works valiantly against his reflex.

“Good morning,” he says as I help him to his feet.

“It is,” I confirm. “A very good morning.”

“Could be better,” he teases me, hanging up the robe. He’s bare underneath.

“Breakfast?” I pretend I don’t know what he wants. We have been experimenting more with the accouterments of bondage, taking turns in each role, as we did during our respective incarcerations. I enjoy both equally, but Will gravitates a little more toward being bound. I would have suspected as much, given how he responded that night so, so long ago when I tied him to my bed for his first time experimenting with any sort of play. There are many reasons why, and I could analyze them all day, but why do that when I am in a position to give him exactly what he wants?

I will admit, though I am more than happy to give up control of my bodily autonomy to Will, and I thoroughly enjoy seeing him claim and reclaim power, I may have a slight bias toward dominating him. It is important to be honest with oneself.

“Depends what’s on the menu.” He winds his fingers into the hair on my chest, using his other hand to blot moisture from the corner of his mouth.

I press past him and turn on the water in the walk-in shower. It is not as grand as the one we enjoyed at the house in Baltimore; narrower, certainly. However, it has several railings and handles, installed for the elderly previous owner, and a built-in corner seat that makes a lovely footrest. I turn on the water but step out to let it heat up, and nod to him. He smiles and steps in, holding out a hand to feel the temperature before immersing himself completely.

While the water heats up, I return to my nightstand and open the bottom drawer. Ah, just the thing. This particular lubricant is a silicone blend and should be up to the challenge. And *these* , I think, will be an interesting addition.

When I return, Will is standing in the stream of water, rinsing his hair, head tipped forward. I set the bottle on the built-in chair and slip forward to embrace him, lips at his neck. He murmurs something lost in the rush of the water, craning his neck back into me.

Here is where a little unpredictability is appropriate.

I press him back against the shower wall with enough force that he is off balance, rolling back on his heels. The support bar, a thick piece of rounded plastic, juts into his backside, and he reaches a hand back to catch himself, curling his fingers around it. That is when I draw my surprise from behind my back, slapping the handcuff around his wrist and closing it.

He glances down and sees what I’ve done. The momentary shock on his face melts into a look of pure mischief. “Where did you get those?” he asks. I have the other cuff open, holding it against the bar. “They feel like the real deal.” Will would know; he and I have both had the displeasure of being arrested.

“Mmm.” I nod in the affirmative, turning him in my grasp and guiding his other wrist toward the cuff that I’ve looped between the bar and the wall. “Borrowed, perhaps indefinitely, from Richard Lesko’s security guard.”

“You should return them,” Will says over his shoulder. “Have him, ah, carry ‘em around not knowing all the dirty things we did.”

“I’ll consider it.” I let go of Will’s wet body and step back for a moment. He tests the cuffs and the bar and I’m satisfied he can’t get away. There are towels waiting on the rack just outside the shower door and I use one to make kneeling easier for him, folding it into a cushion. He settles in, head tipped forward, resting against the tile, the water still cascading around us. I stand once more and survey him, memorizing again the braille of his spine, the trail of freckles that have appeared on the backs of his shoulders from the Cuban sun. They are my constellations. His love and acceptance is my sextant and combined, I will always know where I am; my celestial navigation.

“You, uh, have a key for these, right?” he asks, turning his profile toward me, hair dripping onto his face.

“Somewhere,” I tease.

“Shit,” he says, but he is smiling.

“Don’t worry. I won’t make you dislocate your thumb to escape.” I kneel behind him now, ignoring the protests of my own knees, no regard for my own comfort. All of my senses are focused on him in any case. I take my time, moving my hands along the expanse of his warm, damp skin, delighting in the way the mist from the shower enhances his scent, vaporizing it to be inhaled more easily. I press my lips against the hairline on the back of his neck and trace them down his shoulder and revel in his sigh.

He rattles the cuffs. That’s my cue. I open the bottle one handed and slick my palm thoroughly, cupping it to catch a reservoir of the lubricant, then bring this to his crevice, his cock, everything in between. He quivers at my touch, balling his hands into fists.

I may feel my age in my knees, but not in my genitalia. I am nearly ready again and hungry for my morning meal. Still, all good food is worth savoring. I angle forward and run my length against the cleft of his backside, unable and unwilling to silence the moan it conjures from my throat, wet flesh on flesh, the beauty of Will’s hard-earned musculature, the dimples that mark the top of his pelvic bone. I can’t help myself; I thrust, again, then force myself to stop. Resting my forehead against the back of his shoulder, I breathe in steam and his scent, wrapping my arms around his chest, one palm sliding lower until I am cupping the scar along his belly.

I’ve always found it fascinating how pain changes a person. I have inflicted it countless times and received my share. Some of the most physically fearsome men I’ve murdered crumple beneath it like flowers underfoot, pride abandoned, their entire selves forsaken. Will bore his gutting with a grace I had never seen before. Even now, when I wish it hadn’t happened, I am still proud of him. Such strength and beauty in his suffering, the way Christ is often depicted,

his grievous injuries portrayed as aesthetically pleasing, his eyes uplifted in an ecstasy that could be construed as orgasmic.

Will murmurs contentedly as I reach between his legs to fondle him, but contentment is not what I want, not right now. So I run my mouth along the slope of his neck, tracing it over his shoulder, gathering the wetness against my tongue. Then I bite him, more than a graze of teeth or a playful nip. It catches him off guard entirely and the sound he makes echoes beautifully against the tiled surfaces around us. Yet it is cut short as he clamps down on his lip, denying me the satisfaction of his voice under erotic duress. He knows I crave the sounds he makes; I'll have to work for them. Just as well.

I let myself rut against him again, just a few strokes before I lean in once more and bring my teeth to the muscle just below his shoulder blade, angling my mouth to bite. Harder. He sucks in a breath but only sighs through the pain with a little laugh. I get more out of him when I resume stroking his length, but the difference is nearly insignificant. "Denying me my satisfaction?" I say softly, my words trickling into his ear, just loud enough to be heard over the rush of water.

"Can't always have what you want," Will scolds me through a half-smile.

"Will…" I murmur through a dangerous smile of my own. It will only be sweeter to hear when he does inevitably give me what I want.

I take a different approach, lubricating my fingers again and easing my way into his entrance. He permits me. More than that — he encourages me with little hums of approval. I finger him until he is trembling. He might refuse to let me have his moans and sighs but he can't help but give me his tremors of anticipation. More lubricant, and my patience is at an end.

I position his hips, stroking the bow of his back before I press the head against his opening, using my free hand to part him and have an unobstructed view. I am overeager and he tenses with a little hiss. Immediately, I relax back and give him some time before trying again. Pain is not pain for pain's sake. The area of the body matters enormously.

Now I can thrust, and I begin. Will twists his wrists in the cuffs again, opens and balls his fists a few times. He still refuses to give me much in the way of his symphony, in either agony or ecstasy. Stubborn. "Sing for me, Will," I whisper against the back of his ear before drawing it into my mouth and edging the cartilage with my teeth. He sucks in a breath, but it comes out as a wry laugh, nothing more. Very well, I will make him.

I thrust hard and palm his erection, forcing it through my hand as I rock him with my hips, savoring the intense internal connection between us. Barely a peep, though I can feel his arousal coming from every pore. So I hold him tighter with my free arm and bite him again on the back of his neck, just at the hairline. There. It echoes again, his strangled moan.

"That was lovely," I compliment him.

The areas of my brain that are less evolved, the wasteland of animal instinct and primordial emotion, are alight and sending out tendrils to capture neurons in the regions of higher-order thinking. They whisper to me. *You own him. Remind him who he belongs to. Make him say it.*

Put your hand in his hair and wrench his head back until he looks you in the eye and admits he exists for you.

Without conscious thought I've nearly done it – taken my hand from his cock to pull his hair and make him look at me. But Will's eyes and the look on his face beat back the lower brain and I am flooded instead with gratitude and love. He smiles at me and I kiss his forehead. "You can bite harder," he tells me.

"Don't tempt me," I warn him, resuming. But I am tempted. And I do it. He cries out this time, and it dissolves into a sweet, aching moan, and I lend my voice to it in harmony. He tightened when my teeth trapped his skin, tensed all over, grabbing my cock internally for a moment, so hard it felt consumed.

Consumed. I see blood beading up where my teeth broke the skin. I am at once both dangerously attracted to it and repelled by the sight. I have spilled more of Will's blood than anything and anyone else and I am owed no more of it, even these few precious drops. But there is no denying my sense of taste – when have I ever refused it? And I put my tongue against the wound.

Will's sigh turns into a pleading whine that is encased in the velvet of desire. He must know what I've done, that I am tasting him now in this way. This is how he orgasms, with me deep inside of him and my mouth secured over the puncture and bruise. At last, I am treated to the full, rich reverberation of his voice, followed by his praises and curses. I seize and finish.

Will rests his head against the shower wall, still panting. I slip out and manage to get to my feet. It is irksome to me, but the support bar is useful in this moment. I am sorely tempted to simply finish my shower and leave him here – again, that base instinct to dominate and possess. But I step out with a towel and bring back the key and help him up for a kiss.

Back to reality. I am unsettled by the livid, angry mark on his neck. The skin trauma radiates out from the focal point. If he was as pale as he was in Baltimore it would look even worse. "I know you gave me permission," I say, washing his hair for him, "but I regret the force I used."

"I don't." His words ring with simple truth.

"I may have to administer antibiotics," I say.

He shrugs, tipping his head back to rinse his hair.

"You have a habit," I say, "of taking less than proper care of yourself. I recall once you had a fever of 105 and treated it with aspirin and whiskey."

"To be fair, I was right in the middle of losing my mind," Will says as I gently wash out the wound. "I was a little busy hallucinating Garret Jacob Hobbs everywhere."

I wish I hadn't brought up the past. Against my will, I remember him having a seizure in my dining room, then tricking him into shooting Abel Gideon to save Alana Bloom. It makes me sick now to think of how I walked on the edge of a knife with Will's life back then. If one

element hadn't gone as planned, Gideon might have killed him. I wonder if I will ever be able to think about those times without feeling the pinch and burn of my actions. It's shameful now, to think of how I masked the terror of my love for him, and the vulnerability it brought me, behind ideas like curiosity and the best interest of his becoming.

Well, he has Become. Perhaps it was a necessary stepping stone.

Not perhaps. Was.

I suppose we are both lucky or fated to be here, now, together. Everything has led here, tributaries to a roaring river to a delta spilling into the ocean.

After we finish, he lets me disinfect and bandage the bite, listens to my aftercare instructions. Then he stretches out on my bed, still damp, towel half off, showing me the entire expanse of one glorious leg, arm curled behind his head. "I can, y'know," he says, watching me comb my hair and dress, through an exhausted but satisfied smile.

"What's that?"

He presses his lips together, dropping his gaze, playing with a loose string on the towel. "Sing," he says, so softly I barely perceive the word.

I stop in mid-button, my shirt hanging open, fingers frozen in place.

"I mean, I used to be able to." He shrugs, still not looking at me, but I can see a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "It's been a long, long time."

I hope I won't frighten him into silence or self-deprecation or sarcasm so I keep my distance, dressing automatically while aching for his next words. "I kept getting thrown into church choirs," Will tells me, looking up again as he runs his fingers through his damp hair. "I liked, uhm… singing with other people. No trouble there, but, ah…" He shakes his head. "They'd hear me and try to make me sing on my own, or come have a lesson by myself and I was…" He shrugs. "It wasn't fun anymore. It felt… I don't know." He shrugs again like there's something on him he'd like to toss off like a dirty cloak.

"Like you had something they wanted," I answer for him. "They wanted you to perform at their command."

"I think so." He nods. "It reminds me of how it felt when Jack would push me to look. I had to say yes because of what was at stake. I w-wanted to do it, to help, but… I resented it, too."

"Exploitative."

"Mmm." He watches me as I approach and sit on the bed next to him, stroking my hand through his hair and down the side of his face, relishing the feel of his stubble. "Maybe I'll try it again sometime, I don't know." He looks up at me through his thick fan of dark eyelashes. "I might let you listen. *Might* ."

"I would be honored." I lean in to kiss him. "Unfortunately, I'm due on the mainland."

He smiles, welcomes the kiss I give. “See you tonight.”

“The music room has lovely acoustics.” I hope I’m not overstepping, but I would endure another Verger brand on my back to hear Will sing.

“Hurry back,” he instructs me.

It feels like an amputation, leaving him like this, but duty calls. I’ve kept Diego waiting as it is. He takes me directly to the Leskos’ dock. I hope I haven’t kept Richard waiting too long. He is not going to like my medical advice today; he’s been too long without a colonoscopy and we’ll need to use the local hospital’s resources.

I am thinking about Will singing in a church choir as I let myself in the front door.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement. A man with a threatening posture, one of the black-clad security guards, moves in to take me by the arm. Another coming at me from the other side. More appearing from beneath the staircase with the intention of overwhelming me.

Marguerite Lesko stands at the top of the staircase, watching.

“Dr. Jakov.” Juan says it as though he’s bound to follow it up with, *don’t make this any more difficult than it needs to be.* He must not fully grasp who I am and what I am capable of. I begin and end his education on the subject by snapping his neck. That’s one dealt with. The next man swings at me, but I anticipate his attack and lean back, his fist passing by my face with a rush of air. His miscalculation earns him a jab in the throat that brings him to his knees, where I take him by the hair and slam his face against the hard ridge of my patella.

“ *Attrape le. Ne le tue pas!”* Marguerite Lesko shrieks from the top of the staircase.

The next two understand that I can’t fight them both at once. One tackles me at the knee, the other wrapping his arms around me from behind. The three of us impact against the cold stone flooring and now they are holding me down, arms behind my back. I can feel blood trickling from my chin where it split against the marble. They are young and very strong. I feverishly wish for the body I once possessed, when I was Il Monstro at 22. I would have murdered them all in a matter of seconds.

Still, I manage to squirm on my side to kick one in the face at an angle that crushes all of the cartilage in his nose. On my back now, if I can just get to my feet. I arch my back and drive my forehead into the face of the last man, but he moves at an inopportune moment, absorbing most of the blow in the meat of his cheek. Another has recovered enough to assist him and I am on my stomach again, my arms held long enough to be cuffed, my legs zip-tied. I should have stolen all of their handcuffs, it seems.

I am kicked several times in the ribs even as I hear Marguerite screaming for them to stop. Not for my sake, I assume, but because she prefers me conscious and whole for whatever happens next.

I ignore the pain and continue to fight. Objectively, I know that I am subdued, but red bleeds around the corners of my vision. Will. Will is in danger. I miscalculated somehow. Some evidence must have been left behind. As the more experienced killer, supporting Will in his first entire design, I have failed him.

I am manhandled into a chair and bound to it with duct tape, my hands and feet still cuffed and tied. During the process I bite my second victim of the day, though not in amorous play, and I have no interest in his foul blood or the sour taste of his sweat. A blow to the face dislodges me, splitting my eyebrow, my own blood blinding me on one side.

And then everything is very still. I am helpless in body. I must turn to my cleverness to find a means of escape now.

They've put me in the middle of the kitchen, the domestics nowhere in sight. A miscalculation on Marguerite's part that makes me smile through the blood dripping down my face. If I do happen to get free, I have dozens of weapons to choose from. The kitchen offers home-field advantage.

The men withdraw, tending their wounds. Marguerite Lesko steps into the kitchen. She is immaculately dressed to match the importance of this moment, clad in an art-deco inspired black and white jumpsuit with long black gloves. Her hair done up, jewelry on. But her face is a mess of tears, streaked with long lines of mascara, her red lipstick smudged. She has a large silver pistol in her hand that looks much too big for her bird-like frame.

"Marguerite," I nod my greeting. "I had an appointment with Richard this afternoon – where is he?"

"No concern of yours. Not now." She reaches into her pocket and withdraws a phone. "I know what you've done to my boy. I know the monster you are." She steps forward to show me the image on the screen. It is a moment frozen from the original live stream video, enhanced with different photographic filters, sharpened somehow. There is a reflection of my face on the shiny chrome surface of the winch I used to lower Hank Lesko into the ocean to be devoured by sharks.

The immediacy of the livestream was integral to Will's design, but I see now that reviewing the footage before sending it past the stars to the satellites and back down to earth might have been prudent.

Again, my love for Will and my fervent desire to see him reach his full potential has caused me to lose focus. I am on my honor to protect him and I have failed.

"Jack Crawford sends his regards." She paces in front of me, her heels clacking on the tiled floor. "It was very kind of him to use his resources to analyze the video and find your face. Then again, he stands to gain his heart's desire as well."

Jack. That adds another layer to everything I hadn't anticipated.

"I hope your goodbyes were sweet this morning," she says, fury and ice dripping from her words even as fresh tears flow down her face. "Did you make love to him one last time? To

Will Graham ?"

"You'd like to know," I say, my voice dead even, "because you were denied a proper goodbye. It would please you if I was as well. If I had left the house before he'd awakened, if I'd been in a rush and missed that final kiss. Even better if we'd had a little lovers' quarrel."

She glares at me, scraping a trembling hand along her cheek, catching tears and mascara alike against her black glove.

"We did make love," I tell her through a satisfied smile. "Entirely satisfying. And I kissed him goodbye many times. If you know who we are, then it shouldn't surprise you that every time we part, we accept that it may be forever."

She takes two wavering steps forward and slaps me. It doesn't hurt. She's wearing a glove and she isn't strong. Bella Crawford, dying in the hospital, had more strength and conviction in her blow, and I deserved it far more.

"You'll never see him again," she threatens me now. "They're on their way to collect him. And then they'll come for you."

I cock my head. "Turning me over to Jack Crawford and his mercenaries? Why would you deny yourself revenge for what we did to your son?"

She lifts the gun and presses it into my forehead, but I know she won't pull the trigger. I had no such assurances when Will put a gun to my head in my kitchen back in Baltimore. I shied away. Now I stare at her with a daring little smile.

"I liked you better, Marguerite, when you were trying to seduce me," I say, offhandedly, as if discussing the weather. "Who will kill your husband for you now? I assume if you openly murder him, you'll lose the fortune you married him for."

She barks out a miserable laugh, and lowers the gun. "You should have taken me up on my offer. You enjoy killing anyhow. Perhaps you wouldn't be here if you'd helped me."

"It's more therapeutic, I think, if you kill him yourself. However, if you let me go, I'd be willing to trade his murder for my freedom."

She scoffs at the suggestion.

"Tell Jack Crawford I escaped. Tell the authorities Hannibal Lecter murdered him. It would be the truth. Who would question it?" I shake my head to fling blood out of my eye. "I could kill him. Or I could help you do it, whatever satisfies you the most."

"What would satisfy me," she snarls, "is you losing the one person you love. I want you to live, at least for a time, knowing you'll never see him again. Jack Crawford will make sure of it. He'll take you somewhere to die the way he wants you to die. All I know is that you'll never see Will Graham again."

I will never hear him sing.

Well, that’s simply unacceptable.

Season 4 Episode 12: Orún

Chapter Summary

The Lecter-Graham household is under attack.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Bluebeard” – Band of Horses

“I used to see the night so anxious, but now I know
The only thing it ever taught me was a grand illusion
That comes and goes, the city blanketed of snow
What if we die, no end and no conclusion
How could you smile? Just walk away
Well I don't know
I don't know
I met you at the railroad station, now years ago
And something happened on the night
I last drank with you in the neon glow
Now I don't see you anymore (la, la, la)
The Midwestern sky, is gray and cold (la, la, la)
The sun never shines, but that's alright (la, la, la)
And I couldn't find the letters that you wrote me
What did you write?
Where'd you go, well I don't know, no
Take a little time gonna roll the dice
Taken for a ride, any normal life will do, too..”

They are making love. Hannibal is inside him, draped over his body, kissing him with steady firmness. Will’s legs are curled around, heels resting at the sweet crease where Hannibal’s ass eases into his thighs. Hands on his shoulder blades, feeling the muscles of Hannibal’s back undulate beneath the skin as he thrusts, slowly, gently, seeming to savor each sensation.

Hannibal’s mouth drifts away from Will’s, moving around the rim of his jaw, working lips and tongue against the warm expanse of Will’s neck, to the shoulder and back up again. Will tilts his head back with a sigh, marveling again at the sweet heat gathering in him. There is only the bed, the touch, their breaths, flesh against flesh. All else is a liminal space that is a room, but could be any room, anywhere, featureless, unimportant.

Will pants his kiss against Hannibal's mouth as it returns. "How does it feel?"

"Perfect – as always. And you–"

"It's so good," Will half-whimpers, tracing his fingertips down Hannibal's spine as it dips and weaves.

Hannibal pauses to gaze down at him, eyes both ravenous and loving, full of predatory praise. He skims his thumb along Will's lip before cupping the side of his face. A hard thrust that makes Will gasp his mouth open and the thumb returns to his lower lip, bending it down briefly before Hannibal administers his kiss again.

They hold each other close, bathed in the warmth they share.

Will opens his eyes.

The house in Wolf Trap is entirely dark, and the night outside is a flat, starless, powdery black. Images move from one window to the next; Georgia Madchen at her maddest, Garret Jacob Hobbs stalking to and fro, Abigail with her gaping throat. He can hear something thumping along on the porch and instinctively knows it's Hank Lesko, reduced to a one-armed torso, dragging himself along, trying to reach up and grasp a window sill.

But Will is in Hannibal's arms in the bed, the space heater humming contentedly, the dogs quiet in their kennel room, the taste of whiskey on his mouth. Hannibal is cradling him close, Will's head tucked under his chin, an arm angling his forehead against his neck. It feels so good he wants to cry.

"They're out there," he says wearily. "The living and the dead. Doesn't matter, th-they all want us."

"They can't get inside," Hannibal promises him. "I've always told you the truth, Will, in my own way. And, now, in your way."

"What if they break in?" Will asks as Hannibal pulls him even closer, the other arm around him now.

"I won't let them near you," Hannibal soothes, stroking his hair. "Because as much as every one of them wants to get their teeth into you, Will, I want it more."

He smiles against Hannibal's throat, but it is brief, strained. "Where are you?" he murmurs, tracing a hand across Hannibal's chest, feeling the curve of his body through the soft material of his dress shirt. "You didn't come home."

Hannibal does not answer. "We don't have much time," he says instead, letting Will go and sitting up. He gets to his feet and comes around Will's side of the bed, offering his hand. "They can't get in, but we can get out."

Will glances at the windows again. There are more ghastly faces; the insurance man they'd found on the bus, Dr. Sutcliffe, some other psychiatrist with a Colombian Necktie.

Beverly. Half of her. Will can't stand to look. Keeping his eyes on Hannibal and Hannibal only, he reaches out and takes the offered hand.

"So concerned with my safety," Hannibal says, slinging an easy arm around Will's waist, headed for the kitchen. "Not worried about yourself?" He says it lightly, a joke in intention, but Will can see the lines of tension etched around his eyes.

"No."

It is not Will's kitchen they find beyond the door, but the Capella Palatina soaring above them, dancing with candlelight. The door shuts behind them with a comforting sound of finality, leaving the corpses behind.

"Perhaps you should. There are days, I think, where you still don't understand your own thinking. Self preservation is a perfectly natural instinct," Hannibal says as they walk slowly, arm in arm, up the aisle of pews. It feels like a wedding. "There's no shame in it." They pause before the altar. "Once, my darling, you wanted me to run. Now I want you to run, Will." Hannibal cups his face, kisses him.

Will shakes his head slowly when their lips come apart. "You and I have blurred," he says. "I'm never going anywhere without you again. You, uhm… you oughta know that by now."

"I've only ever known you as a man striving to be his best self." Hannibal touches his hair, then his cheek.

"And that man would never leave you behind."

They walk hand in hand down the staircase to the thick door leading to the catacombs. But it is not into the skeleton-strewn dark where they walk – it is into the Hobbs hunting cabin, into the thicket of antlers, the dead girl still hanging as if waiting for them. Will stops to kiss him now, and Hannibal takes him by the shoulders, turning him with sudden force and pressing his back against the tines of the antlers that crowd the wall. Just a little pressure, just to feel them against the muscles and bones of his back. "Hunting with you was the best time I ever had," Will says as Hannibal kisses his neck now, breathing him in.

"Are you a hunter now, Will? Or still an angler at heart?"

"Hard to say." Will's words whisper against the sharp cut of Hannibal's cheekbone.

"Will you know bait when you see it? Or will you swallow it, hook and all?"
Will strokes his face now. "I'll get the bait, the hook, the pole, and the angler, all of them – drag 'em so far down there's no sunlight."

They move again, down the stairs and out the front door of the cabin, but the woods are now the woods of Lithuania, and they are saturated with shadows and fireflies, the crook of every tree thick with snails.

Will doesn't know why he says it, but Georgia's words come to him. "They'll never find out what's wrong. They'll just know that you're wrong."

“Will.” Again, the kiss, nothing but the kiss. “There was never anything wrong with you.”

“Not anymore.”

And suddenly Hannibal is gone. Will is caressing air. He stumbles, grunts in surprise. The night is a symphony of sudden silence before the insects remember to sing.

There is a light on in the hunting lodge. Chiyoh? Will turns toward it.

It is Magdaly that opens the door.

“Necesitas ver esto.”

She stands aside with a sweep of her skirt. Will approaches and looks through the open door.

The interior is not the hunting lodge. It’s a kitchen, large, full of white tile and stainless steel. Hannibal is there, tied to a chair, bleeding. Trapped. Threatened.

Bait.

He shakes blood away from his eye and looks up at Will, the picture of a broken heart. “I want you to run, Will.”

Will feels tears gather and spill over, but his voice is unwavering. “I’m coming.”

Will’s eyes flew open and he sat up in one smooth movement, the sheets pooling around his waist. He tracked the gauzy curtains as they rustled in the cool night breeze and reoriented himself. He’d fallen asleep in Hannibal’s bed, waiting for him to come home.

He was unnerved, wary, heart still pounding from the dream. If it was a dream – it had the rich texture and incredible detail of the memory palace.

Necesitas ver esto.

Something was wrong. He did not stop to question the instinctive knowledge that seared through his mind.

Will slipped out of bed and onto the carpet, perched on his hands and toes, lowering himself slowly to prevent the floor from creaking. He crept to the open french doors and out onto the small balcony, peering between the ornate iron bars that held up the railing. The back garden was dark, but he immediately clocked movement in the windows of the cabana house. Two men with guns. Three more were headed up toward the mansion, dressed in black, sporting light tactical gear.

Terror gripped him and he was overcome for a moment, his body shaking as he thought of Magdaly, the baby, Alejandra. Luz. Luz wasn’t barking. They’d killed his dogs. They must have.

And then it was gone. The fear. Evaporated, without so much as a shadow in its wake. All that remained was the afterbirth, bloody and primal. He wasn't afraid. He was righteous. Dangerous.

Will crawled back inside and opened the drawer on Hannibal's side of the bed to find his folding knife, then returned to the balcony, scrunching himself up behind the shutter, invisible, he hoped, from within the bedroom. The cool ocean air caressed the exposed skin of his arms and legs, lifted his hair gently even as his body was perfectly still, his breathing shallow and near-silent.

He could just make out the sounds of their soft footsteps as the men cleared each room of the mansion systematically. At last, the door to the bedroom opened. Even as they crept, these men did not know the house, didn't know the sections of flooring and what sounds they made. Will could smell them – sour sweat and adrenaline and the faintest hint of cigar smoke and gunmetal.

A man stepped out onto the balcony. Will acted on pure, perfect, calculated instinct, on what felt like muscle memory. He snaked out from behind the shutter and clamped his hand over the man's mouth, slitting his throat with the folding knife. It was a good knife – sharp and well balanced, and it did the job beautifully. Will released him and stepped back behind the shutter, even as his victim gurgled and flailed loudly enough to attract his companions' attention.

"Thompson!" one of them hissed, rushing to his side. Just as he bent his body to kneel and assist, Will stepped out again and shoved him with all his might. The intruder cried out and fell against the railing, completely off-balance. Will ducked down and grabbed his legs before standing once more, flinging the man's feet up with him. His adversary screamed something unintelligible as he fell over the railing, limbs flailing for any kind of salvation. The sound he made when he hit the gravel walkway below was thick and final.

The final man raised his gun and pointed it at Will. For some reason, all Will could think about was the whites of the man's eyes, how wide and bright they were, displaying, without a doubt, the pure humanity of terror. Will cocked his arm and threw the knife. He had no hope of actually hitting his target – Hannibal was the expert in this, not him. But it was a sufficient distraction for an already rattled shooter to wince in anticipation of the blade. It bounced harmlessly off of his shoulder, but gave Will time to leap at him, sweeping his arm up and knocking the gun to the side. It tumbled out of his assailant's hand and landed somewhere on the floor.

As they grappled, Will realized the full extent of how strong he was now. It was so much easier than last time, he thought, the notion floating gently over his mind as he caught the man off balance and shoved him back on the bed, tangling him in the mosquito netting as he flailed around trying to get up. Certainly much easier than killing Randall Tier. He might be sore in the morning from the exertion, but that was, obviously, a small price to pay for what was about to happen.

In the distance, he heard gunshots, but ignored the potential distraction.

Will lifted the antique metal bedside lamp and cracked it against the man's skull just as he managed to get to his feet. He fell, tearing the canopy of netting to the floor with him. Will pulled the lampshade and the electrical plug free and hefted his weapon again before bringing it down on the back of the man's head. Once. Twice. Four blows total. Blood arced up from the impact, splattering him.

Panting, Will set the lamp back on the nightstand, satisfied the intruder wasn't getting back up. He crept over to the balcony again and looked out. There were two men laying in the garden, face down. It was hard to be sure from this distance, but he had a feeling Chiyoh had had something to do with it. The rest was silence. No dogs, no Magdaly, no more intruders that he could see.

He went into the bathroom with slow, measured steps and caught himself on the sink, looking at his bloody face in the mirror.

Hannibal.

He had to find him. Never came home from the Leskos'. They must have figured out who was responsible for Hank's death. How didn't matter. But he needed to get to the Lesko mansion, and fast – bring Chiyoh, bring guns, bring whatever it took to get Hannibal back.

If he was still alive.

He had to be.

Will hurriedly washed his face, hands, and neck, then clawed on dark clothing. He retrieved the folding knife and slid it into his pocket. Listening again, so hard his ears ached, he still heard nothing to indicate life. He crept out into the hallway and headed for the main staircase.

He was three steps from the bottom when he heard the gun cock behind him.

"Will Graham. Put your hands on your head."

He knew the voice. He raised his hands slowly but kept them at shoulder level, turning as he descended the final three steps, rounding the wrought iron bannister. "I know you," he said dreamily, cocking his head to the side. "M-miriam?"

She stepped closer, making it easier to see her fair hair in the moonlight that managed to filter in from outside. She had a pistol leveled at him. Even in the dark he could see that one of her hands was prosthetic, though this was far more than a placeholder, something to create the illusion of being whole. It seemed fully articulated, the fingers jointed and steadying her wrist just as a real hand would. Instead of flesh-toned, it was white in some places, metallic in others.

"Will. Put your hands behind your head and get on your knees."

"Miriam, I need your help." He swallowed thickly, allowing tears to swim into his eyes. "H-he's doing something to me. Th-the lights… he stands in front of the lights and-and the

chamber music and I– I don't know where I am. Where am I? W-where is this…?"

"This is Cuba," she said firmly, taking another step closer. "I don't want to shoot you, Will–"

"Cuba?" he wondered, feeling the trail of warmth as his tears spilled over. "I don't– how long since the Dragon? I can't rem-remember anything, just… his voice."

She wavered, just for a moment. "He's not here, Will. He can't hurt you, okay? We've got him, he can't hurt you anymore."

He let a sob bubble between his lips, and she let him wipe his face with the back of his hand. "Just when I-I'd start t-to ask questions, to try and remember, he'd drug me," Will murmured miserably. "I just- I just did what he told me. He told me my name was Christopher and…" He dropped his hands to press one over his mouth, the other curling around his midsection as if in pain. "He said we were in love," he managed through his tears.

"Will, just get on your stomach, okay? Just lay down for me and–"

"Please don't tie me up," he begged. "He does that sometimes–"

"Just get on your knees and down on the floor for me, Will." Her voice was soft, and he could see the emotion working in her throat. How could she help but see herself in him? "It'll be okay, I promise."

Will lowered himself to his knees, taking what he hoped looked like a ragged but resilient breath. She came around behind him. "That's it," she soothed. Will got down on his stomach, allowing himself to tremble all over, but kept his palms flat on the floor.

She knelt next to him, but didn't put her knee in his back. He could feel her fingers — the hard plastic ones — moving down the collar of his shirt. Gently, she peeled away the medicine tape on the back of his neck. "Oh my God," she breathed, looking at the bite wound. "Did he…? Oh God, Will—"

"Yes," he whispered, soft enough so she would bend over even closer. Just a little more. "B-because…"

Closer.

"Because I asked him to." Will tensed his muscles and flipped over on his back, a hand coming up to hit the gun right under the magazine. It flew out of her grasp, skittering across the tile floor. She lunged for it, but Will reached out and grabbed her jacket, holding her back, yanking her down to the floor as well.

He was stronger, but her training was better. That much was evident when she was able to pin him against the floor with all of her 110-odd pounds, wrapping her legs around his and pressing into his shins with the tops of her feet. She held his collar with her good hand, and raised the prosthesis, smashing it across his face and splitting open his lip. He managed to catch it when she aimed the next blow, taking it in the shoulder instead, but Miriam retaliated by wrapping the unnatural fingers around his throat and squeezing.

This wasn't a flesh and bone appendage. It did not tire or cramp. It was metal and molded plastic and it was going to choke him out. He coughed and wheezed, twisting in her grip, unable to free himself.

Her eyes. Those big, shimmering blue eyes, canny eyes that saw too much, the windows to the brain that had almost caught the Chesapeake Ripper. He spit blood into them. She blinked furiously but it gave him a fraction of a second of relief, enough to draw a wheezing breath and arch his back to fling her off of him. She thudded onto her back on the marble flooring.

Will reacted on cool instinct, his heartbeat even-keeled. He whipped the knife out of his pocket and open in the same motion, bringing it down into her chest. He felt each layer of her body give way to the blade, as if time was moving molasses-slow – skin, fat, muscle, bone, heart. He felt the bisected organ try and beat one last time, sending a vibration up into his hand, the last dispatch from her life.

He slowly rose onto his knees, letting go of the knife, and watched her die. It hurt. As the haze of red in the corners of his vision ebbed away, it left anger and pain in its wake. It didn't feel like killing Hank Lesko. Not even like Randall Tier or Garret Jacob Hobbs, when it was kill or be killed. Didn't feel righteous. He'd taken a page from Bedelia's book, as much as he'd hated her. He didn't like that the last thing Miriam had heard him say was a lie.

"He does love me," Will told her. "I love him, too. So I had to, Miriam."

She looked at him, and he looked at her, until the light went out. Her last expression was one of pity.

She was dead, but he still spoke. "If you'd just stayed away, you'd be alive."

Hannibal had probably said something similar to Beverly Katz's corpse.

Will got up and pulled the knife free, wiping it on her jacket before sliding it back into his pocket. He lifted the handgun and tucked it in his belt, then went out into the garden.

The dead men had been shot through the head. "Chiyoh?" he called, keeping his hand on the gun in case his call would draw other enemies to him. "Magdaly?"

Over the roar of the night time surf, he heard a dog barking.

"Luz," he whispered, and rushed down toward the shore. A light, dim but glowing stubbornly, flickered in one window of Magdaly's Easter-colored cottage. He skidded to a stop on the sand at the sight of two more bodies stretched out not far from the front door.

More of Miriam's men. They suffered deep slashes on their faces, skulls cleaved open, eyes now sightless and staring.

The door to the cottage flew open, and Luz and the puppies ran out to him, barking, ignoring the sprawling bodies soaking blood into the sand. Will knelt to embrace Luz and pick up each puppy in turn, letting them lick his face. This was how Magdaly found him, stepping out into

the moonlight. Her white dress was splattered in blood, but she looked calm, smiling a little at the dogs. In her hand was a bloodstained machete.

“Come in,” she beckoned. “But be quiet. The children are asleep.”

The kids had slept through it all. Another of Magdaly’s miracles.

Will left the dogs outside and stuck the gun back in his waistband. The cottage was lit only by a candle in the window, the combined kitchen and living room shadowy and fragrant with herbs and the remnants of dinner.

Chiyoh lay on the sofa, her jacket half-off, her chest and shoulder bandaged with strips of torn-up bedsheet. She was pale, her usual polished hair in a disarray. Will went to her immediately. “Are you–”

“I don’t think I will die,” she said. “I can’t be certain. Where is Hannibal?”

“The Leskos have him. I think Jack’s there, too, or on his way,” Will told her, throwing caution to the wind and putting his hand over hers. She felt clammy.

“It’s up to you, then,” she said, the words themselves bringing their own grimace of pain, separate, it seemed, from the physical injury.

“I know.” Will stood and squared his shoulders, swiping a hand along his cheek and finding it tacky with blood again. Miriam’s blood. He turned and put his hand on the back of a chair, trying not to buckle under the enormous task and the knowledge of what was at stake.

The scratch and hiss of a match startled the quiet. Magdaly stood at a table against the wall, lighting candles. Will realized immediately, in the growing light, that what he had initially thought were decorations on the table were, in reality, sacred objects – statues of angels and saints, a grim reaper-like figure, herbs, candles, beads, feathers, a bottle of rum.

Still stained in blood and now stained in candlelight, she turned to him. “You should go now,” she advised. “I will care for her until you return.”

Will looked at Chiyoh. She nodded wearily.

“ *Aché pa ti* ,” Magdaly said.

Season 4, Episode 13: Camino

Chapter Summary

It's our season finale, Fannibals. The feast is life. Eat it and live.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Same Old Blues” – Phantogram

And this is nothing new,
It's just the same old blues
Like a devil on my shoulder
Nothing left to lose
You can never break my heart
Everything will fall apart
You can never save my soul
I think it's time to let me go
I keep on having this dream
Where I'm stuck in a hole and I can't get out
There's always something that's pulling me down, down, down
And this is nothing new
It's just the same old blue
And this is nothing new
It's just the same old blues
Today I lost my future to the past
I got nobody left, I'm going nowhere fast
Never getting far away enough
Like a shadow on the sidewalk
I can't shake it off
You can never change my mind
I think I'm running out of time
You can never save my soul
I think it's time to let me go
I keep on having this dream
Where I'm stuck in a hole and I can't get out
There's always something that's pulling me down, down, down
My heart is down on it's knees so I try, oh I try
But it's too late now
There's always something that's pulling me down, down, down
I keep on having this dream
Where I'm stuck in a hole and I can't get out
There's always something that's pulling me down, down, down

My heart is down on its knees
And no one is hearing me screaming
There's always something that's pulling me down, down, down
And this is nothing new
It's just the same old blues
And this is nothing new
It's just the same old blues."

Amateurs.

Marguerite Lesko has made the grievous error of leaving me ungagged. Though there is a guard at my back – Teodoro, if memory serves – with his gun drawn, held loosely in his right hand, tapping anxious Morse code against his thigh – I have worked her into quite a state. She paces, weeps, screams at me, gestures wildly with the gun, then abandons it on the table only to pick it up again.

"What will Richard say when he comes home?" I ask her, my voice soft yet commanding – my therapist's voice. "Have you imagined yet how you will explain our situation to him?"

"I'll show him the video," she barks at me. "He can see what you've done to our boy."

" *Our* boy." I consider the words as though I am taste-testing an unfamiliar wine, rolling it from one side of my tongue to the other. "Is he Richard's boy? I can't say they look much alike."

"He is," she insists, sniffing. "He – was."

"Genetically, perhaps. But spiritually, they never constructed a bond, did they?" I pause, letting her ruminate, a long-nailed hand on the back of a kitchen chair.

"Señora…" Teodoro tries. She silences him with an ugly look down her alpine nose.

"When Richard arrives," I say, compassionate but factual, ignoring the tacky blood that congeals over my eyelid, making it stick to itself, "he's going to see his physician tied to a chair in the kitchen. Certainly he'll have a bodyguard or two with him – what do you think he'll do? Are his present escorts loyal to you?"

She slams the gun down on the prep table and goes to the refrigerator, opening it for a bottle of white wine. I watch her struggle with the cork until Teodoro helps her. Now would have been a perfect chance to escape or attack, if I could move more than a few inches. Even if I dislocate my thumb, I am taped to the chair, my legs zip-tied. It would take me too long to free myself. Still, I struggle clandestinely. If I perspire enough, the adhesive on the tape could fail.

I watch her down a glass of wine in a few gulps and pour another. "Señora," Teodoro tries again, reaching out a hand towards her shoulder, his entire demeanor radiating a calm he is

attempting to infect her with.

Marguerite swears at him in French and slaps his hand away, tossing the wine down. She returns to me and bends down, out of reach of my teeth, her hands on her knees. “I don’t care,” she snarls, “what Richard thinks. I don’t need him anymore, Dr. Lecter.”

“You need his money, don’t you? Or do you plan to resurrect your musical career?”

She scoffs, her eyes spitting poison as she leans her narrow hips against the prep table. “I don’t need his money,” she says. “I’ll have my own soon enough.”

“Ah.” I nod, still trying to loosen the tape without anyone noticing. “You’ve sold me to Jack Crawford, then? Payment upon delivery, I hope. Or did he give you an advance?”

“All of this?” She is feeling the effects of the alcohol already. I doubt she’s eaten in the last day or two, and who knows which of the pills I’ve prescribed are floating in a sea of chardonnay inside her. “I did it. *Moi* . I had the video analyzed. I saw your face in the reflection. And then I found you again – your Most Wanted poster, and I knew– and now you’re here. For a serial killer, you really aren’t very clever.” She lights a cigarette and takes a long drag. “Forget the music. I should work for the FBI.”

“A noble aspiration.” She’d be an interesting addition to the team, I have to admit. “I’m sure Richard would have never thought you capable of such cleverness.”

She scoffs, pausing to raise the wine bottle to me in a kind of salute before bringing it straight to her lips.

“But you’re capable of many things,” I purr softly. “Won’t he be surprised?”

She gives me a long look, her tears dried now. I can tell she is considering a few different options for this scenario we’ve found ourselves in. Marguerite paces over to the large window over a section of counter tops and peers out. I watch her, and look at the sky, hoping to catch a final glance at the stars with the short bit of freedom I likely have. Or life. Jack may not imprison me. In fact, it is far more likely that he is going to kill me. He’s made the mistake of letting me escape one time too many.

But there are no stars. The night is cloudy, hazy, a fog rolling in from the ocean.

Strange. That was not in the forecast. Diego and I discuss the weather reports daily on our journey to and from the mainland, our conversational ritual.

“He’s always underestimated me.” Marguerite is speaking again, and I focus my mind on her, grasping at the strings I may use to puppeteer her, if I am clever enough.

“You could have it both ways,” I suggest with a casual shrug of my bound shoulders. “If you want Richard’s fortune as well as the bounty, let me kill him for you and stage the scene. Then sell me to Jack Crawford.”

She steps forward, eyes narrowing as if trying to see something out of focus. I can smell the sour sorrow and bitter hatred on her. It’s burned away her perfume. “Why would you help me

– only to surrender again…?"

It's likely too early to play this card. I should hold onto it, but it tumbles loose from my lips because, deep within the core of my being, I am afraid. I am desperate. Not for myself, however "Let Will go," I suggest. "Send some of your men to stop Jack Crawford's."

"The deal," she says, setting the gun down on the table to open her nearby handbag and withdraw a compact mirror, "was for both of you. And after what you did to my Hank, I'd never give you the satisfaction."

I am formulating a response when the kitchen door flies open. In storms Richard Lesko in a wilted linen suit, his face damp and red. It makes his white mustache stand out lividly against his skin. He is flanked on either side by his guards, another trailing behind speaking rapidly, begging Señor to wait a moment and let him explain.

"Margie, what the hell's goin' on here?" He stops short, looking at me, bloody, tied to a chair.

"Hello, Richard," I say. But I am looking at Marguerite as she calmly traces her mouth with lipstick, a violent shade of red.

"Doc? Jumpin' Jesus, what in the Sam Hill happened to you?" The guard tries again. "Shut up, Enrique, I'm talkin' to my wife!" He takes a step forward.

The pistol is hidden behind Marguerite's handbag on the table. "Margie, you better tell me *right now* why my physician is tied to a chair in our kitchen."

Marguerite looks at me, the slightest curve of her painted lips, a cruel slice. I smile back encouragingly with a little nod. This really is what's best for her therapy, brief as my treatment was.

She picks up the gun, the safety sliding with an audible click that sounds impossibly loud. Ear-splitting, then, are the gunshots as she unloads the pistol's entire magazine into her husband and his bodyguards.

She is not in a place now to think of the needs of others, but I find it irksome nonetheless that she may have damaged my hearing, even if the tinnitus is temporary. Preserving one's eardrums is important for a musician.

Richard is dead. There is no doubt; shot through the head, skull blown out. One of his guards is twitching in the rapidly spreading pool of blood. The other is screaming and holding his arm. Enrique helps him up and they disappear into the next room. I hear the front door bang open. The wounded man's cries are abruptly silenced. My ears are still ringing; was it the slamming door that cut off his mewling, or something else?

I glance at the window, swelling with both hope and dread.

The fog is very thick now. The security lights in the back of the house are useless, diffusing into the haze of droplets.

Magdaly put Will's soul back into his body. When faced with such a miracle, how can one refuse the notion that she can control the weather?

Marguerite is panting, but smiling. Atta girl.

She pulls her phone from her pocket again and presses on the screen, holding it away from herself, the camera pointed at me. I hear the telltale chimes of a video call. "Mr. Crawford," she greets. "Like what you see?"

"Mrs. Lesko. I like it very much." Jack's voice.

"Hello, Jack," I call. "How have you been?"

"You need to gag him." Jack's no amateur. "Don't leave him alone, not even for a second. Make sure you keep a gun on him. My team should be there shortly. Looks like there's some fog in the area; they'll have to be careful on the boat ride over."

"Is Alana with you?" As long as the guard at my back and Marguerite have no plans to gag me, I will continue to speak. I haven't heard from my old friends in almost a year.

"I'm here, you piece of shit." That is Brian Zeller's voice.

"Back off, Z." Jack again.

"I'm here, Hannibal." Alana now. "Got tired of waiting for you to come and kill me."

"How is Margot?" I inquire politely. "Assuming you're still speaking to one another."

Her furious silence is all I need to know I'm right, even over the phone. "She must have realized by now that your interest in her was motivated by access to Mason. You needed his resources to recover me in Italy. I can't imagine she's pleased that you're still mired in all of this, spending your child's inheritance. Did you ever love her, even a little bit? Or did I ruin that for you?"

"Can someone fucking gag him already?" Jack thunders.

"You're not getting under my skin, Hannibal." Alana's voice is cold. It has lost any of the girlish charm it once had.

"Not with my words, no," I agree with her, tilting my head. "With a blade, next we meet. Jack, I'm disappointed you aren't coming to collect me in person. Wouldn't you like to beat the hell out of me like you did in Florence? Or did you stay back to protect Alana from me, in case I escape?"

"You're not going to escape, Dr. Lecter." Even through the tinny phone speakers, I can hear his antipathy, his rage, and his terror. He knows he cannot guarantee his vow. As soon as the words have left his mouth, I imagine he realizes this.

But I *am* going to escape.

After a bloated pause where Marguerite opens her mouth and takes in a breath to taunt me as well, the kitchen window shatters. I watch a garden brick tumble across the tile floor in a shower of glass, thudding against the opposite wall.

We all turn to look at the newly created egress. All I can see is the fog.

I tense, ready to break the tape and wiggle out of the chair. I expect Chiyoh to open fire any second.

Will's dog leaps through the window.

Luz skitters her claws over the counter top, regaining her balance. What could have been a moment of saving grace is squandered - Marguerite and her remaining bodyguard are too shocked to move. Luz gathers her legs beneath her and leaps at Marguerite with a symphony of barks and snarls, latching Marguerite's gun arm between her jaws. The weapon flies out of her hands and discharges. I feel the blaze of the bullet as it grazes my deltoid muscle, searing through my shirt and my skin before lodging in the wall somewhere behind me. Blood erupts, but I smile, showing all my teeth.

Marguerite shrieks as the dog undulates, shaking her petite frame with enough violence to drag her to her knees. The guard raises his gun but hesitates, unable, I suspect, to get a shot off without potentially killing his employer.

It is in this chaotic interim that the kitchen door swings open again.

Will.

Just when I think I have seen the most beautiful sight the universe could design, I see him like this. It is even more striking than when we killed Hank Lesko. Will is not just murderous. Hair wild, soaked in blood, eyes preternaturally alight, a crimson-stained machete held loosely on one hand and a knife in the other, he is not just a killer. He is *feral* . Worshiping at the altar of his instinct, he is my mongoose, here to save me from the slithering snakes.

I will never forget this moment as long as I live. If heaven is what Will says it is, a treasured memory replayed for eternity, this is what I want.

He falls on the remaining guard as he is lifting his gun with a shaking hand, screaming something that was once a word but is now distorted, pulled out of shape by his terror.

He *should* be terrified. Decorum requires his scream. It is the appropriate, respectful, polite way to greet my beloved.

My clever, vicious boy.

Will hacks the guard to death with the machete. His quick, chopping blows paint the cabinets and the ceiling with blood. I feel a thick splatter on my face and I am overcome, nearly broken under the weight of my love.

It is beautiful.

Will rises and turns to Luz and Marguerite. As the dog twists her arm, Marguerite's high heeled boots slide out from under her on the slick tile. She falls, her head smashing against the side of the table and then the floor with a resounding crack. I wince, an instinctive reaction, considering my family history. But what happens next erases the discomfort of my sense memory. The dog savages her face and neck.

Jezebel.

Marguerite's body is limp; she does not struggle. All the fight has gone out of her, seeping from her body the way her blood seeps over the pristine tile, mingling with that of Richard and the guards.

At least she was able to shoot her husband and savor a few moments of her becoming.

Marguerite Lesko assumes the shape of a woman full of dark and swarming flies before, all at once, they scatter.

Will whistles and the dog releases Marguerite's jaw, trotting over to him, tail wagging, muzzle splattered with blood. He tells her to sit and stay and she obeys.

At last, Will turns to me. For a moment, it's almost as if he doesn't recognize me. Then, his face softens, re-humanizes, and tears come to his eyes. "Hannibal," he says, just above a whisper, dropping his weapons. They clatter to the floor.

"You were supposed to leave," I say through relieved tears of my own.

"We couldn't leave without you," he says.

"Mrs. Lesko? Mrs. Lesko, can you hear me? Hello?"

It's Jack's voice, strained with panic, coming faintly from beneath the kitchen table. Will stoops to retrieve Marguerite's phone and raises it, sweeping the camera carefully over the scene of carnage, pausing with care to make sure they see Marguerite's face sans her nose and lips, which have disappeared into the dog's mouth. I hear Alana gasp and Jack curse and Zeller invoke God.

Will lifts the phone to eye level, using a bloodstained finger to switch the camera angle so Jack can see him looking down at the screen. "See?" he says, his voice all razors and needles and silk ribbon and velvet. " *See* ?"

"Will… please…" It's Alana. "Please, Will, oh God – this is *not* who you are, you hear me? Hannibal made you think you're a monster s-so-so you can be like him, but you're *not* , Will, *you're not* –!"

" *I know who I am.* " Will clips each syllable with an air of complete finality. They'd be fools to doubt his resolve.

Still holding the phone, Will approaches me, a tender smile on his face. He slides onto my lap where I am still bound to the chair, and puts his arm around me. The other he uses to angle

the phone so we are both in the shot. I am treated to a glimpse of Jack's stricken face as he glares and seethes, trying to strike us dead with the hate that gleams in his eyes.

Will nuzzles against the side of my face. "Miriam's dead, Jack. They're all dead." He laughs, and it rings warmly through the bloodstained room. "Is this what you wanted? To, uh… wind me up and watch me go?"

Jack says nothing, but juts out his chin, gritting his teeth, tears in his eyes.

"Well, apparently, Agent Crawford… this is how I go." He brushes the fingers of his free hand through my hair. I turn my mouth to his and catch his kiss, and it is more perfect than a note clearly sung at the end of an aria, the final bite that marks the total consumption of a victim, the view from the top of the Duomo in Florence.

Jack and whoever else is in the room with him is shocked into silence as Will very clearly puts his tongue in my mouth and devours my lips with a hunger brought from bloodlust. And he doesn't stop until Jack wordlessly ends the call. Then he tosses the phone in the pool of blood and cups my face in the palm of his hand, thumb tracing the divot beneath my lower lip.

"Good to see you, sweetheart," he murmurs before kissing me once more. "S'pose we better go, huh."

I nod.

"One more minute couldn't hurt." He settles himself in my lap and kisses me again. Again. Again.

Later, as we approach the dock, the fog lifts, rolling back in increments. It has all but dissipated by the time Will fires up the boat engine. Will whistles, and the dog bounds on board. "I never trained her to attack," he feels the need to tell me. "But when I was leaving the island, she wouldn't get out of the boat. I didn't have time to fight her on it."

"I see that Chiyoh was indisposed." My heart hurts, suddenly leaden in my chest. "Perhaps Luz thought it best you didn't go alone."

"Chiyoh's alive, but she'll need your help when we get there." Will backs the boat out, turns, and glides out over the water, one arm steering, the other around me as I press closer to him on the bench seat.

I want to say something significant. Thank him, express my boundless, nameless gratitude to the stars above, some kind of acknowledgement of this fierce happiness and aching love that rolls through my body in warm waves, in sync with the tide beneath us. Before I can formulate anything of substance, I realize I can hear music.

A lone voice, rumbling just above the sound of the motor. Scratchy at first, hesitant, but growing more and more sure of itself with each passing moment.

Will is singing to me.

“'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood

When blackness was a virtue the road was full of mud

I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form

Come in, she said

I'll give ya shelter from the storm

And if I pass this way again, you can rest assured

I'll always do my best for her, on that I give my word

In a world of steel-eyed death, and men who are fighting to be warm

Come in, she said

I'll give ya shelter from the storm…”

***

I rise long before dawn, though we are in winter, and it is dark deep into the morning. The pool is closed, but I have a key card for the door, ensuring privacy. The fewer people that know I am here, the better.

After my exercise, I return to the Royal Suite; not a terribly inventive name for the apartment, considering this was once a palace constructed for a prince. It is undoubtedly luxurious, however, all 19th century Empire, full of gold, chandeliers dripping from the ceiling in every room. It is a gilded cage, but it is a cage nonetheless. For now; once affairs are settled with the syndicate and our benefactor, there are extended freedoms to be had.

It has been interesting to be addressed as Count Lecter for the first time. I’m still cataloging my feelings on the matter.

I find Will still in bed, tucked beneath the luxurious white duvet, one arm, shoulder, and nipple exposed, hair tumbling so dark against the ivory pillow. Sleeping angel.

It makes me consider the last time I saw him unhinged, resembling a demon instead.

I dress casually, but cannot resist getting back into bed, grateful for the warmth against my pool-cooled flesh. In the bedside drawer, behind my sketch book, wrapped in a piece of red silk, is the folding knife he killed Miriam Lass with. I open it. The blade is clean, but I could not bear to remove the bloodstains from the silver of the handle. I am still considering it, turning it over on my hands, when Will stirs at my side.

Beautiful killer, I marvel at what you have become.

Will wakes, aware of me in the bed next to him. He is visibly pleased, treating me to one of his wider smiles, showing me his teeth. Sometimes he gets up in the night and sleeps in the other bedroom, just to maintain appearances. It isn't time yet — our situation is not stable enough to be entirely open, and housekeepers do like to gossip. So far, all of their talk, from what I've managed to overhear, is about Chiyoh – how pretty she is, but how she never smiles, and what kinds of clothes they would wear if they had her figure. They don't know that I can understand most of what they are saying. Better that way.

I sit up and recline against the padded, moon-angled headboard, and I hand him the knife, hilt first. It is in his hand now, held casually, with the confidence of someone who is intimately aware of how to use such a thing. *Intimately* . My breath comes just a hair faster now, though I master my expression, one of mild interest.

"Happy anniversary, Will."

He blanches. "Is it… our…?"

I smile, relaying a sense of ease. "The anniversary of the Havana Massacre," I remind him. "Two months to the day."

"I didn't know you were keeping track." Will pushes himself up on his elbow and traces the flat side of the blade down my chest, pausing at the nipple, then works it gently against the highest button of my shirt. The blade is still sharp, and the delicate stitches that hold the button in place part with no protest, barely a whisper. Will places his free hand against my hip and leans in to press his lips to the freed skin of my sternum. Now he slides the knife against the next button, working his way down with a maddening slowness that I thoroughly enjoy.

Will slides his hand over the outline of my cock as as a coda to the button work, then kisses me with all the significance the day holds. I feel desire race through my body, a chemical spill of love. However, I do enjoy our games. I refuse to let my boy win this easily.

I keep my mouth stubbornly shut, and deny my hands Will's warm flesh, no matter how inviting it looks. "Sorry I, ah, didn't remember the date," he says.

"Hmm," is my response.

"Huh. Playin' hard to get," Will notes softly against my neck. "I'm gonna need to step up my game."

"It appears so," I confirm, voice neutral, a calm veneer to steady the racing of my heart. Murder doesn't make it thunder like this. Just him. Just Will.

Will pulls away from me and puts the blade to his forefinger, letting out a little hiss of pain as he presses the pad against the weapon's point. Blood wells up and the iron scent of it assaults me. He raises his bleeding finger to my bottom lip and traces a drop of red against it. I can't help but bring the taste to my mouth, and when I open up, Will sneaks forward in a quick

movement to lock his mouth over mine. This time, I allow the kiss. I cannot prevent my response, as much as I would adore prolonging this tease.

Will breaks free after a maddening moment, and glides his finger to my lips again, probing it inside, sliding it across the tip of my tongue. “Y’know,” Will says as I suck on his finger, reveling in the taste. “I think I’ll go for a swim this morning. You don’t mind, right?”

My fingers close around his wrist as he makes as if to get out of bed.

“What’s wrong? I mean… you *wanted* me to become a stronger swimmer. Said as much on, uh, the island, if I recall.”

I know he is bluffing, a distraction played as part of a game, all of it threatened through a smile, but all at once, I have no defenses against it. “You might be able to stop,” I say, voice low, hoarse, “but I can’t. Don’t ask me to.”

“I won’t be gone long. An hour, tops.” Will pulls, trying to release himself. I catch his other hand, the one with the knife, and force him to let go of it, dropping itonto the bed.

“Hannibal—“ it is my name, and a plea. One that goes unheard. I toss the knife on the nightstand and climb onto his hips, intent on dominating the encounter. Will surprises me once more by rolling before I catch my balance, wiggling out from under me and pouncing.

“Got you,” he mocks gently from where he is splayed out on me, chest to chest, one hand around my wrist, the other pulling my hair to keep my head against the pillow. Oh, Will, my unpredictable, darling fiend.

I reward him with half a minute to gloat. He spends it kissing my neck. Then it is a matter of reversing our positions and catching Will’s arms to pin them above his head.

“Devious,” I praise him. “All acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy.”

“Cruel? You like it,” he insists. He has the audacity to smile up at me in that way he has to know I love, and squirm free to put his arms around my neck, pulling himself up for a furious kiss.

I pull away and rise to my knees. Will holds on stubbornly, is lifted by his grip on my neck.

I patiently peel his arms away and force them to his sides. “I wonder how you’ll surprise me next, Will.”

Will invokes the Bogart film. “ *Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life* .” He tries to free his arms, but I lean my weight against them more solidly. There’s that lip again, in the slightest protrusion of a pout. But after a moment he relaxes onto the bed on his back. Gently, I settle my tongue on one nipple and draw it upward, collecting his taste as it travels. Will shivers under me, and I ease my grip. Free, he strokes a hand in my hair, the other arm curved behind his head.

I touch my lips to the corner of his mouth, caress his face, slide a hand between his legs to cup him through his underwear. He leans up for another kiss, but I am faster, clamping a hand

over his mouth.

“Two months marks another anniversary,” I tell him with measured patience, despite how achingly hard I’ve become. “Do you remember?”

Will moves his tongue against my hand, then catches it in his own, sticking one of my fingers in his mouth now, a promise of what I could have if I asked..

“Two months since you sang to me,” I say.

Will smiles, but it is equal parts bashful and self-deprecating. The reminder causes him to tense in increments under my touch as the words leave my mouth.

“I’m not asking you to sing for your supper.” I brush my lips against his. “Merely a gentle request to hear it again. At your leisure, of course.” My heart wrings itself out waiting for his answer.

“All right,” Will relents. “S-sometime. I’ll, uhm… I’ll even take requests. Assuming you want something from the Bob Dylan catalog. Or, uhm, ‘This Little Light of Mine’ or ‘How Great Thou Art’.”

I take his hesitant promise at face value and kiss him, easing him back against the pillows. Will’s knees part for me with no hesitation and I mold against the prone body beneath me. Reverent kisses down that exquisite ivory neck, the tiniest touch of teeth against his collarbone.

When I look at Will again, his eyes and face are soft, apologetic, and his voice is gentle when he speaks. He settles his hands on either side of my face. “You aren’t, ah… *upset* that I forgot what day it was, are you?”

I shake my head, smiling. “Why cling to the calendar when every day is a gift?” Perhaps it is more exact to say it is a hard won reward, a prize, the spoils of war. I embrace him, resting my head on the warm expanse of Will’s bare chest, the faint smell of blood still prickling my nose and enlivening my senses. I close my eyes and let myself revel in the darkness, carved through only by Will’s heartbeat. I imagine the organ in my mind, the vision simultaneously anatomical and romantic, and send something like a prayer to it. *Always love me. Never leave me* .

Will kisses my forehead. I abandon my reverie and the prayer, and kiss him again, more pressure now, but still sweet, a declaration of my love more than the clumsy words themselves. I turn my adoration to his nipples next, first one, then the other, then push down the waistband of his boxers. He responds to me with only the most delicate sighs and delicious little noises.

I sit up briefly to arrange two pillows and ease Will face down onto them. I cherish the smooth skin of his lower back, then trail his mouth from the side of Will’s neck to the end of his spine. I am very aware of the tremble of anticipation that creeps along with my touch.

After a pause to undress and wet my fingers, I slide in in one, then two. Will relaxes into my hand, putting his mouth against the pillow to muffle his sounds. How chaste, considering he knows full well that nobody can hear us in this part of the old palace-turned-hotel. I observe Will's physical state with the sharpness of a hawk, ignoring my own growing need.

"Slow down your breathing," I suggest softly, moving to grasp Will's cock with a firm hand.

Will follows the doctor's orders, closing his eyes, turning his head to the side, a lock of hair falling over his eyebrow. I attend to his every breath and move my fingers in response, stroking with my other hand. Within a few moments, Will arches his head back with a great exhale, his body tensing. "Relax," I advise as I stimulate and stroke at measured intervals.

"Fuck," Will manages through his breathing, which he still seems to be keeping as controlled as he can. "Hannibal—"

The sound of my own name as worship. It brings warmth to me every time, even after these years we've known each other. *Again, make him say it again.*

"Hannibal, yes—" Another, and another. I'm going to continue until he can't take the pleasure anymore.

The last one leaves him quivering, slicked with sweat, the sweetest dampness like a morning dew, my favorite scent in the world, of the stretch of years I've existed on this earth.

"You have to stop," Will begs, turning around at the waist, his wet hair stuck to his forehead. "I can't take any more."

"As was my aim. However, there is one more thing you'll have to endure." I lift myself and press gently into his entrance. There is little or no resistance until suddenly there is, and I cannot stifle my own sounds of pleasure. I use one arm to steady myself, and the other to continue Will's frontal stimulation, which results in lovely cursing and Will's fingernails, short as they are, snagging into the delicate fabric of the pillowcase.

I am able to curb my own pleasure until I feel the squeeze of Will's climax grip me.

After the searing, white-hot release, we lay on the bed in a damp tangle, trying to regain our breath.

"That was…" Will manages as he rakes his hand through his damp hair with a smile. He is never able to come up with an appropriate word and lets the exhausted chuckle speak for him.

"I've always been a student of your anatomy, Will," I say.

"More like a professor," Will says with an exhausted laugh. I draw him close and he rests his head on my chest, gently stroking me from navel to between my legs, not to arouse, but in a reverence, a soothing gesture. "I mean, you wanna talk about shifts in reality…?" He sighs, and the warmth of his breath, laced with his contentedness, brings to my heart a bright spirit,

searing, painful in its beauty. This is happiness, and I have committed myself to its dogged pursuit for the rest of my life.

I trace my fingertips over Will's throat as it curves against me, lingering over his pulse.

At last, we rise, bathe, dress ourselves, though there isn't anywhere to go. Bundling up in our overcoats, we step out onto the terrace with our coffee. It is cold, the snow draping the city before us, but the sunrise is bright and clear against a cloudless sky. We settle onto a lounge apiece and watch the day grow brighter, lingering over the steam as it rises from our cups, talking a little.

It is a beautiful view, encompassing many striking landmarks; the Admiralty, the Alexander Garden, St. Issac's cathedral. The River Neva — as of now, unfrozen — surveyed in perpetuity by the bronze statue of Peter the Great.

I put my gloved hand over Will's as he raises his mug to his lips, smiling a little before he takes a drink.

" *Dobroye utro* ," he says.

" *Dobroye utro* ," I reply, correcting his pronunciation.

"*YA tebya lyublyu*," he says. This he pronounces perfectly.

" *YA tozhe tebya lyublyu* ," I reply. Then, "When this city was known as Leningrad, the Nazis besieged it for 900 days. Thousands died of starvation."

"Huh," he murmurs. "But, ah, I'm guessing there were some who *didn't* die..." He gives me a playful half-smile. "Because they were cannibals."

"This is the city for us, Will," I say.

"The feast is life," he says, after leaning in to kiss me. "Eat it and live."

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